Speeches for the Soul

Jan Lavrinovski

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Pleasure Loving Corrupts the Soul

Let us reflect again on what it is we're doing, what our goal is, and why. While we're afflicting our bodies this way—we, we who so often rejected the commandments of God through our bodies—let us now afflict the very body through which we have transgressed God's commands.

We remember that these 40 days, if we take out the Sundays, they're approximately a tithe, a tenth of the year. We offer to God a tenth, the tithe of our time. We become, as Saint Paul says in the 12th chapter of the Letter to the Romans, a living sacrifice, a living victim. We offer our very selves through this action of self-denial and fasting.

We are reminded by Saint Gregory the Great that a pleasure-loving body leads to sin. If we allow our bodies to enjoy the pleasures and abundance of this world, it will lead us to sin. But the opposite is also true: an afflicted body, an afflicted body, brings us to seek God's forgiveness. This is the instruction of Saint Gregory the Great. So let us afflict our bodies, that we may find God's pardon.

Fasting helps us to bring the body under control; it makes the soul the master of the body. Saint Gregory Palamas says that fasting really must always be thought of alongside self-control. He has a phrase—Saint Gregory Palamas says to us that fasting and self-control are like a double wall of defense, a double wall of defense guarding, protecting the peace of the heart that Christ has given us, protecting us from sin, from the bombardments, the attacks of temptations, from the demons. A double wall of defense. So let us build this double wall of defense.

Saint John Maximovitch says to us that throughout this Lent we are building; we are building to a high place. Saint John says that with every step, each day that goes by, we build, we struggle, we approach God Himself, His forgiveness. We are working our way back to Pascha, to the Resurrection, through this self-denial, through this fasting. And Saint John says to us that as we climb, the climb is easier as we drop, as we allow more things to fall away. When we shed from us, from our hearts, anger, judgment, jealousy, all the passions, our heart becomes lighter to carry. And indeed, when we begin to eat less, the climb becomes easier. We build our way back to God, to seek God's forgiveness, to seek God's grace.

But Saint Gregory Palamas, of course, reinforces the fact that it is not just the body that must be fasting in this Lent. We fast in both body and soul. Saint Gregory Palamas reminds us that it is possible for us all to indulge all of our senses, not just the ear—eating—but all of our senses. We indulge the eyes. We indulge the eyes when we look with malice at our neighbor, when we look and we see things that we may find fault in and we judge people, when we look with anger, when we look with lust. This is how we indulge the sense of the eyes.

And we indulge all of the sins. The ears may be indulged through listening to gossip and malice about people, reveling in the bad news of other people's misfortune—the slander, the types of music that we listen to. Some types of music can disturb the soul: the crudities of the world and our media, the inquisitiveness of both our eyes and ears that lead us to seek more and more information that is no good for us, that is none of our business. All of this is indulgence, indulgence of the senses.

And we must fast. We must deny ourselves for this short period, at least make an additional effort to tithe, to give this time to God. It is no good—it's no good denying one sense and allowing another to run rampant.

There is no benefit whatsoever in fasting from food if we do not try to take self-control over our other senses. Do not let them run rampant; do not let them lead us into sin. True fasting is both body and soul, because through our fasting, Saint Gregory Palamas says to us, we are—we are calling on God. It is like a cry to God. This self-denial, this giving of ourselves to God in the short period, is a cry out to the mercy, to the mercy of God.

And of course, as so many fathers teach us, if we wish to find compassion from God for our sins, then we must show compassion. If we desire compassion, we must have compassion for others. Let us forgive, let us show mercy in this Lent. Let us strive to truly forgive our neighbors. We began Lent with Forgiveness Sunday; let it not be an empty ritual, but let us continue genuinely to seek to forgive.

There are people— all of us, every one of us—will find difficult to forgive in our lives. There will be people whom, if we are honest, we may never truly forgive fully as we should. But let us be willing to try; let us try to forgive. Let us be willing to allow forgiveness to come to us for those people. Let us not sit back and secretly hold on to the judgment, to the anger and hatred that we may feel towards others. If we fail—fail to be willing to try to show compassion—how can we ask for compassion from God?

And then the first Sunday of Lent itself: we have the Triumph of Orthodoxy. Saint Ignatius says to us this triumph is all about the triumph of those things that bring us salvation. But he warns us. Ignatius says to us it is not for ordinary Christians to go out seeking the heresies of the world, to challenge, to combat, because it is enough of a task for each of us to guard our own hearts—our own hearts—against heresy. For heresy is a poison. Heresy, false thought, false belief, can rob us of our salvation. It is as immoral as any action—any action—we may perform. False belief, heretical belief, is equally immoral.

We will be judged for clinging to false belief. When our false beliefs come into challenge from the faith of the Church, let us recognize where we are wrong; let us change; let us accept that we are at fault. Let us humble ourselves before the truth of the Church. False belief threatens us, and it is a poison that poisons our very soul, our spiritual being. Reject heresy in every form.

This triumph—this Triumph of Orthodoxy—is not a matter of the ego reveling in being right. It is a celebration of everything that God has given to us for our salvation: everything—the saints, the mysteries, our services, the calendar, all of the traditions of the Church. It is there that Christ is to be encountered. This is the great mystery of Christ's self-revelation, His ongoing revelation to mankind: that Christ Himself is encountered in these very traditions that He has given to the Church.

So let us keep to them, not in a slavish way, but through free will. Let us give obedience to the tradition of the Church. Let us submit ourselves in humility to all of these traditions.

Let us not turn our back on any of them. Christ—Christ is manifest in Orthodox tradition because it is the Holy Spirit who has led the Church, who has given the Church these very

traditions. But we must be careful. Let us not, as many people have done, seek after some kind of technique or a system which we believe can conjure up spiritual states.

There are many people who, having grown tired of the intellectual, scholastic nature of Western Christianity, have gone seeking after the experiences that many Eastern religions have promised—the pagan faiths of Hinduism and so on. And through these techniques of meditation, of yoga, they are promised that they do A and they will experience B: do this and this will happen. And so they are taught these techniques.

We must never, never be tempted to reduce Orthodox tradition and the practices—the fasting, the asceticism, the prostrations, the prayers of the Church—we must never reduce this in our thinking to some kind of empty observance, like an outward technique, that if we perform this ritual, this will happen, almost like magic.

When Saint John Climacus—Saint John of the Ladder—explained these 30 stages, these steps in the ascent to God, he didn't set out a technique to follow, to put into practice step by step: do A, do B, do C. He described the encounter of the soul, an obedient soul encountering God, and what the soul must do in terms of relinquishing its connection with the world and with sins and temptations—how it must overcome its giving of itself to the world, the flesh, the devil, and so on. And in this experience of overcoming the self, we discover then that the heart is enabled to encounter Christ, is enabled to receive the grace of God.

But it is no empty technique. It is encounter with the living God Himself. And through all these traditions, God is encountered. The revelation of Christ is there in the transformation of our own hearts. It is the change; it is in the ability to repent; it is in the ability to forgive and love and show mercy and to worship and love God in truth. For Christ is truth—Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And in all truth that we encounter in the living tradition of the Church, in the direct encounter and transformation of our hearts, it is there that we encounter Christ.

The saints have walked this way before us. Their descriptions of the spiritual life, their accounts of their struggles on the path—paths which they have followed—are not a set prescription that every one of us must follow to the T. Not every one of us must say, "Right, I must exactly do this, and I must exactly do that, because that particular saint did this and that." What they do is describe how their sinful souls have been transformed and perfected in Christ, how the saints have experienced the glory of God—a taste in this world and the perfection and glory in its fullness to come.

So let us follow these traditions and recognize that they have given us a roadmap, yes, to follow. But it is in each of the personal, specific circumstances of our lives that we put them into practice, that we try to overcome who we have allowed ourselves to be—the sinfulness of our own hearts, every one of us—the particular temptations, the particular sinfulness, the particular fallen nature of who we are.

Saint John Climacus, in his description of these steps, and the lives and writings of the saints, are there to show us how we can overcome in our lives—through obedience, through love, through love of God—how we can be transformed. The mystery of Christ's revelation of Himself in and through the whole of Orthodox tradition is there to be discovered in each of our lives, through our freedom and through our obedience to God.

Hidden Hatered Condemns Us

How often people new to orthodoxy will ask questions about theosis or the heights of prayer that we read about in the lives of the saints.
And while it's a great blessing of course for us who speak English to have access to these to these ancient texts, these spiritual texts, we have to be careful because spiritually we mustn't try to run before we can walk or before we can even crawl.
The truth is of course that the Christian life itself is difficult enough especially for us in this weak generation. Actually being a Christian a simple basic Christian is an incredibly difficult task.
So let's look at what is necessary for salvation before we allow ourselves to to fantasize about the heights of prayer and those things that we see in the lives of the saints.
Jesus taught us that if we don't judge then we won't be judged there in Matthew chapter 7.
Don't judge.
God will judge you if you judge.
And this is an extraordinarily merciful promise that Jesus is making to us. He says to us, even if we can't be like the saints, then we can still find salvation by refusing to judge others in his name.
Let us find hope in this. Even if if we find it difficult to fast, if if we find that the passions within us take control of us too often.
If if we're failing daily and having to restart again and again in our spiritual lives before we fall into despair, we must take this promise of Jesus as a great encouragement.
If we don't judge others, we will not be judged.
So it requires that we face up to the the truth of ourselves and see how we judge others.
We have to examine this in our lives. To what extent am I judging my neighbor?
And once we recognize this, of course, the church fathers provide us with great teaching about how we can avoid this temptation. avoid falling into this sin.
So at its basic level, we pass judgment on others with every word of gossip.
Every word of gossip that we utter is an act of passing judgment on someone.
Every time we call someone a sinner, let alone when we condemn them in our heart.
Even picking out somebody's faults or or bad habits is an act of passing judgment on them.
Now, of course, our spiritual fathers, our spiritual confessors have a role in naming our sins to help us to see them that we may see the truth of ourselves.
But this is quite a different relationship to our everyday ordinary relationships with the people around us.
And we are not to fall into this because judging others is harmful and it is dangerous because when we do we're condemning we're condemning the whole person often on the basis of that that one fault that we're perceiving in that moment.
It is an act of condemnation.
And it's important that we see this in ourselves because St. John Clamark says to us, "Judging others is demonically inspired." And more than that, St. John Maraka says that judging others is the fruit of secret hatred.
It is a sign that we carry hatred in our heart.

And that's why it's so important that we see it in ourselves because every word of gossip, every every judgment we pass on others reveals the hatred that lurks within us.
Even people who would like to think that they don't hate when they fall into gossip, when they fall into condemnation of others, let their words condemn their heart. Let their words tell them there is hatred.
I see my hatred.
And of course when we condemn others we wound our soul. The very soul is wounded through this act of condemnation.
And of course Jesus warned us. He said, "Don't be concerned with the speck in your neighbor's eye.
Concern yourself with the beam in your own eye." We ignore the great beam, the great mountain of sins in our own lives and condemn and name and gossip the trivial sins of our neighbors.
This of course is is simply hypocrisy.
When we gossip, we are hypocrites.
When we judge anyone, we are hypocrites.
Who amongst us could bear to have the mountain of secret sins within them exposed to the world?
And in that condition, who would there then dare to condemn and judge anyone around them?
It is hypocrisy.
The church fathers are very clear and very practical in the way that they teach us to overcome this this great sin. The first step they say is to simply see our own sins to recognize the truth of our sins. During Lent we repeat the the prayer of St.
Ephraim.
Grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother.
Grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother.
Seeing the secret passions of our own hearts puts a break on this impulse to judge.
Because at the root of judgment, at the root of condemnation of other people is pride.
And we overcome pride partly by the remembrance of our sins. Not dwelling in the specific details and the circumstances and places and people. Not to revisit the feelings of sin, but to remind ourselves of the sinner we are.
Our judgment of others reveals the the inner disposition of our soul.
the disposition of our heart and and however much we like to to dress it up in in in fake concern or or pretend that we're speaking righteously, it is a revealing of the true condition of our inner life, our spiritual life.
Now of course identifying evil in itself is something quite different.
We must see evil for what it is. If we tell a friend as well that you've sinned this you're falling into sin quietly say it to their face.
It's different to either calling them directly or behind their back a sinner.
Yes. say look this is a sin I can't participate this is evil but not to brandish this label you are a sinner you are evil we can reject an action without labeling a person if our sins were exposed what labels would we carry what would the world call us if it saw the truth of our sins S.
Isaac the Syrian also warns that when anyone passes judgment, they open their soul to a

myriad of evil possession passions.
And so when we resist this desire to gossip, this this desire impulse to condemn our neighbor, we're participating in the purification of our soul.
And so those those desires to speak of grand things such as theosis, well, we ground these these ideas in the reality of our lives through our repentance.
This this struggle to resist the impulse to sin is the process of theosis, is the process of transformation.
It is the nitty-gritty of the the truth of the spiritual life. there in that discomfort, in that struggle to resist, to condemn other people.
Now, as well as the the harm, the the damage that we do to our own soul, gossip damages those who listen to us.
Whenever we gossip, we damage spiritually other people. And so should we of course avoid ourselves listening to gossip because even though the words are spoken, they are the words of someone else, someone else's sin in their condemnation.
When we willingly listen, we participate in that sin. We sin too. And similarly, when we gossip and condemn others, we draw other people into our sin and we injure them.
The harm that it causes really is a denial of love. When we condemn our neighbor, when we condemn anyone, we are refusing to love them.
It is a refusal of the love of our neighbor. But also, it is a refusal of God's love.
To gossip, to slander, to condemn is a denial of divine love.
It cuts us off. Cuts us off from the love of God.
Which is why it's so dangerous to our salvation.
We remove ourselves. We deny God's love.
When we condemn others, when we reject God's love, we reject God and we reject our salvation.
When we slander someone, when we speak gossip, we make these lips an instrument of demonic activity.
We lend our lips to the work of the devil when we gossip.
We are all sinners of course and and every day we must ask God for his mercy. We must remember that approaching day of judgment. Every one of us must do this. And again the church fathers say in this process of preparation of our life leading to the day of judgment there are two very simple things that they constantly tell us to do. Yes. The first is to simply to refuse to listen to gossip.
Refuse to listen to anyone who condemns our neighbor, our brother.
If someone accuses somebody else of sin, tell ourselves, I have no part in this.
But secondly, we must resist being quisitive.
We fall into this sin when we are curious about how other people live. When we poke our nose in other people's business, poke our nose into other people's lives and their spiritual lives.
It's none of our business how other people live. We should be focused on the way that we live. On Mount Aos, there is a a saying among the fathers there. When they approach dinner, it's nobody's business but their own who what's on their plate. Look at your own plate and not the plate of your brother.
the father say what they're doing, what's going on in their life, it's none of your business.

And of course, the internet encourages us in this curiosity about other people's lives. The internet teaches us to not only see and consume these details of other people's lives, but to make comment, to judge, to gossip online. to leave comments on videos and so on and so on. How easily this impulse can grow in us and we see people spending hours, hours and hours doing nothing but gossiping online, accusing, judging, condemning.
St. Simmons, the new theologian, wrote that someone who truly sees their own sins will consider everybody around them to be saints.
Anyone who truly sees their own sins will see the saintliness of those around them compared to themsel. And this is what that phrase means by we see ourselves as the worst of sinners. This isn't self-hatred.
It's a recognition of the truth of our sin which helps us to bypass this condemnation and judgment of others.
It helps grow within us this this rejoicing at the spiritual victories that we see in other people's lives. When we see people praying and repenting, when we see people truly loving God, the heart will rejoice, not seeking out that which we can condemn and make ourselves feel better than, superior to.
This is the work of the devil.
So let us take these words of Jesus and be encouraged.
No matter how sinful we are, no matter no matter how many times we fall and start again, get back on our feet and begin again and again. No matter how terrible and sinful our daily lives are, Jesus assures us of salvation if for his sake, for his sake, we condemn nobody but ourselves.

Refuse Dispair

It's very easy and sadly very common for people to have a distorted understanding of their salvation. And this distortion often goes in opposite directions depending on whether people belong to Christ's body, the church or not. Those inside and those outside the church tend to have this distortion of their salvation that goes in different directions. I mean first the the group of Christians who are outside of God's church are often affected with a modern heresy that their salvation is assured that they are already saved which is in in complete contradiction to St. Paul's teaching that we must run the race to the very end. They believe they have no need of repentance.
And of course, repentance was the first call of Jesus in his earthly ministry.
They believe that because they have certain thoughts about God that this equates to faith and therefore they are saved.
This is a modern heresy.
It has nothing to do with the teachings of the church. It is it is completely alien to authentic Christianity.
But for members of the church, there is a distorted understanding of our salvation and a way of thinking that we can be vulnerable to.
First, if we are even a little bit aware of our spiritual condition, just a little, then we will know the depth of our sin. We know how sinful we are. And we know that we are deserving of

nothing but condemnation from God. That on judgment day, we deserve hell.
and seeing the depth of our sin, seeing what we deserve.
Members of the church can sometimes fall into despair.
They can become utterly pessimistic about judgment day and their own place in eternity and how they will be judged.
Now, this is a temptation that we must reject.
It's absolutely necessary that we reject this temptation to despair.
To encourage us, let us remember Jesus encountering the rich young man in in the 19th chapter of St. of the Gospel of St. Matthew. The the rich young man first of all approaches Jesus and calls him good. But Jesus rebukes him. Not because Jesus isn't good, but because he recognizes that the young man approaches him as a human teacher and calls him good. Jesus makes it clear if you approach him thinking him good, but don't accept his divinity, you are in error.
So all those in the world who who claim that Jesus teaches good things, but they don't believe he's God or believe he's a prophet or a holy man, but he isn't divine, they are in error.
And Jesus has made this clear that the good works of men are like dirty rags before the goodness of God.
No one is good but God. Jesus is good because he is God. He is divine.
Human goodness is as wickedness before God.
And then the rich young man when questioned by Jesus claims that he has he's kept the commandments all his life.
A little like the the modern day Protestants who claim that they are saved because they think a certain way about God. Well, he believes he has kept all of the commandments.
But Jesus draws him into the truth of his his his condition because the rich man is very wealthy and the possessions that he has have a kind of tyranny over him. But more than this, if he claims to have kept the commandments, then he will have loved his neighbor as himself. How can any rich man say he has loved his neighbor as himself if his neighbor goes hungry? That is not love.
And Jesus draws it out of him and says, "Go sell everything you have. Give it to the poor."
And the young man leaves disheartened.
And in response to this, he turns to the disciples and Jesus says, "It is so difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. More difficult than a a camel to pass through the eye of a needle." We don't need to concern ourselves whether he meant a little camel or or the great ropes that may be referred to as a camel.
The point is the difficulty of the rich entering heaven.
And the disciples turn to him and say, "Who then can be saved? Who then can be saved?"
They asked this question not out of concern for themselves. They have abandoned their their jobs, their fishermen, their fishing nets and their boats and their offices and work. They have made themselves poor to follow Jesus.
And yet they say, "Who then can be saved?" Because they are full of concern for other people.
And Jesus says to them, "With man it is impossible.
With God all things are possible." And this is what Orthodox Christians must hear when tempted to fall into despair, when tempted by this distortion about salvation. Because our

salvation is not dependent on our sinfulness, on our weakness. We must not gauge our salvation by our weakness, but by the power and love of God.
This is what we must base our hope in.
Not what we have done. For anything that we have done will be as dirty rags.
When we see our sinfulness, when we we recognize our weakness, we know we have nothing to offer to God.
But we must hold on to hope. Hope that is based on nothing but the mercy and love of God. Nothing that we can do or have done. We must we must be like the tax collector standing beside the Pharisee who goes before God knowing he is a sinner not in false humility. He knows he is a sinner and yet he approaches God and he leaves justified because God accepts him in his repentance and his humility. And we must have humility before God recognizing what we truly are. the sinful creature we are deserving of condemnation.
Christ calls us to repent and when we fall when we fail to repent when we fail to keep the commandments to get back up and begin again. St. Anthony of the desert famously said every day I begin again.
Looking back on my previous day I know I have failed to keep God's commandments. failed to be the creature he created me to be and I begin again.
St. Anthony who lived in the cave and prayed continuously.
He wouldn't have been sinning with words or actions and yet he knew what a sinner he was began again every day. How much more then should we, not just every day, but every hour, every moment, moment by moment, we must enter into a condition of continuous repentance, a continuous attempt of seeking God's mercy and beginning again.
This must be the condition of our life as Christians.
St. Silan the Aonite says to us, "We must keep one foot in hell but never lose hope.
One foot in hell because we know what we are. We know we deserve to be condemned.
But hope because God loves us and offers us mercy and forgiveness.
We we must be aware of our sins in order to repent.
We must humble ourselves before God, but never despair. Never fall into the temptation of despair.
Never lose hope in God's mercy and love.
The apostles were charged by Christ to carry this message into the world. A fallen, broken world of pain, of isolation, of fear, of sinfulness, of broken creatures who turn their back on God continuously, who fail to love. And when we see ourselves in this way and recognize the truth of ourselves, let us remember why the gospel is good News.

Age of Madness

The statistics tell us there has been an explosion of of mental sickness, mental ill health, particularly in in wealthy countries. And the more affluent a nation becomes, the higher the rates of depression and suicide. And we see this particularly amongst young people. And when we say affluence, we're not necessarily talking about personal wealth, but the wealth of a nation collectively.
And not just in the extremes of depression and suicide, but many many young people feel a

sense of disconnection not just with the world around them, but within themselves, with their very life.
And we should say is this any wonder? We shouldn't be surprised.
We can only understand this phenomenon from a spiritual perspective.
So we should say to our young people, you are not mad. Of course you are not mad. There are so many reasons why you feel this way.
First, every one of us is spiritually sick. every one of us. We're fallen creatures. We're we're separated from the way we're meant to be. We're we're living unnatural lives. We're deformed every one of us to a lesser or greater extent.
And as the reality of this affects us, of course, how could we feel at ease and comfortable? And we shouldn't. We shouldn't.
So first the the realization that death is trying to separate us from God.
The reality of death, the the realization of death within us.
Death is conquered by Christ.
And we only know this victory of Christ through hope and faith.
But all the time our organs, our muscles, everything about our body is accusing us. Is trying to convince us that we are mortal, that we are simply mortal creatures who must accept our death, this aging of our body.
In Christ, we cling to eternal life, a life beyond our bodies and beyond the the physical five senses.
So, of course, we feel turmoil. We we who are created to walk with God with such honor, with such dignity, we have fallen into the mud. We we feed with the pigs. We've exchanged royal robes for for rags and filth and we live in fear of of losing ourselves to sin and evil.
All of us feel dark impulses at times and people can feel a threat. They panic at this sense of evil within themselves.
And our bodies, our very intellect resist us when we begin to struggle spiritually.
Our bodies and intellect resist us at every turn. They fight to remain friends with this world.
And we have to battle with ourselves.
When we talk about the old man of sin, we must put him to death. But he will continue to try to take back our life.
He will continue to try to lay claim on us till the day we die. And this struggle will continue throughout our lives.
And when we do try to struggle, what do we see in ourselves? We see we see a lack of strength. When when in those times we try to forgive and we try to love, what do we see? We see judgment.
We see anger, condemnation for others.
In our longing for God, we are confronted by the limits we have imposed on ourselves through disobedience.
And even if we even if we manage to bear a little fruit in our lives, a little virtue for God, our impatience takes over and we see the fruit the virtue withering away as it's scorched in the sun. We see it rotting on the branches and we say, "Where is the harvest?" And the world around us laughs.
You may have friends or relatives who reject you or mock you.
Perhaps they call you a freak or they consider you an extremist for pursuing the things of

God.
We do not belong to this world.
And we who refuse to chase after the world's treasures and seek after the treasures of the kingdom of God. Of course, we cannot belong here.
This is right. But we're not mad.
We're not mad. We don't belong to this place. The closer we draw to God, the deeper our sense of eternity will grow. But so too, the sense of of distance between ourselves in this life and the eternity of God.
And the impact can be traumatic.
But even in this this final insane generation, Christ's church is still to be found.
And in his church, Christ reveals himself to us.
But what could be worse than to long for God, but still to see our sins, see how we are engulfed in darkness, engulfed with our own unworthiness.
The pain that this brings to us, the pain of heart can be unbearable at times.
The fire of God is infinite, but it is terrifying.
Our passions must be burned away. And so before illumination, there must be fire. There must be burning.
There must be flames before illumination because without pain, without suffering, we can never know divine love.
We can never know God's divine love without pain.
And so, of course, people will feel mad.
People will feel mad. They they they then look at the insanity on television.
We only need to peer at the BBC or CNN for 5 minutes and it's like looking into an asa insane asylum. The madness that we see there, the images, the words, the voices that try to convince us that good is bad and bad is good.
And of course the message that those who don't believe this are crazy.
Until we seek Christ, until we try to be obedient to him, we will remain sick. We will remain sick. But however lost we feel, we must cling to Christ.
Must cling to the hem of his garment.
Even if it means being dragged through the dust, never let go.
We're told in the Holy Scriptures that one of the signs of the last generation, of the coming of the end of time, will be that men's hearts will grow like stone. There will be no love there.
And of course, we see this in our world today. But let us examine ourselves.
When we try to love, how much love do we truly see in our own hearts?
Let us draw close to Christ.
Let us seek him. But let us remember that even when he was raised, even when Christ appeared to the apostles, he still bore the marks of crucifixion in his flesh. The wounds left their marks in Christ. And he bore those marks even after resurrection.
And so too for us when we look back on our lives and we see those times when we've tasted the pain of hell, the isolation, the misery of our lives, let us remember this experience because it will keep us alert. It will help us to focus. The spiritual life is about attention. Where we pay attention? Do we pay our attention to God? Do we remember God constantly?
Or do we attend to the things of the world?
And the remembrance of our experience of hell, of suffering will keep us grateful to God for

his mercy and forgiveness.
And gratitude turns suffering into joy.
Let us remember that Christ put aside his glory to become one of us. And we must humble ourselves even as he humbled himself. We must imitate him in this way.
Refuse the pride and the noise and the excess of the world around us.
For now, we continue to walk on earth as mortal beings, but we must never lose sight. We must never stop putting our attention on the eternal kingdom of God.
And when we refuse the things of this world, when we when we refuse the treasures, the pleasures, the things of this world, let us know and let us not be horrified or shocked that it is then that the mil the world will truly call us mad.

Fantasy Misguides

At a recent Vesper service, we were blessed to be anointed with oil from the Ivaron, the Hawaiian icon of the Mother of God. this miraculous myrr that I witnessed with my own eyes appearing from the simple frame and and what is a print of the original icon such a humble physical object and yet it bears the image of the mother of god and so there in a small congregation there in a little church in Shroptshire we were anointed with something so holy and miraculous to see the myrr gushing pouring from the from the icon was extraordinary and it occurred because the mother of God worked this miracle because the icon bore her image. Something so simple was used by God in this way to bless us.
And we every one of us bears the image of God. When we go out into the world, we we should be alive to the to the presence of God in us and around us. with us with the people that we encounter, the circumstances that we endure.
We should be alive to the presence of God, alive to the possibility of the miraculous happening in the very ordinary circumstances of our lives.
The ordinary circumstances. Too often the demons can deceive us into fantasizing about what is necessary for our spiritual growth, our encounter with God. Too often people fantasize about a cave or the forests or a monastery on a mountain and they want to escape the the wife or husband that they have, the children, their neighbors, their work colleagues, the particular circumstances of their lives.
But this this is a denial of incarnation.
Christ incarnated to be one of us in the ordinariness of our lives.
And this this is where we encounter God.
God draws God draws close to each of us and draws us to him through the the particular circumstances of our lives.
And we see this of course in the gospels. The magi who studied stars, they saw and were able through their study of the stars to to encounter the newborn Christ.
and the fishermen the fishermen first called through this miracle of the the great catch of fish from their boats.
Let us think about that event. First of all, first of all, St. St. Luke in the fifth chapter of his gospel says to us that Jesus came and preached from the boat of Peter.
We see here something of the generosity and the justice of God having used Peter's boat.

God blesses him in two ways. First, he he grants him this great catch of fish, of course, but he then makes him his disciple.
He doesn't take nothing. Doesn't take something for nothing. He blesses in return.
And St. St. Luke says that Jesus told Peter to put out onto the lake into deep water.
Peter who was an experienced fisherman who St. Luke says toiled all night without a catch.
Along comes Jesus the carpenter and tells him to put out into deep water.
What does Peter do? Does he draw on his his years of experience and say, "Who is this this carpenter to tell me a fisherman how to do my work?" No. He's tired. He's toiled all night.
But he's obedient to Christ. He puts out into deep water.
We recognize here the obedience that we must have to the commands of Christ.
We mustn't allow our experience, our thoughts, our so-called worldly wisdom to prevent us from being obedient to Christ and experiencing the miraculous through this obedience.
And so Peter puts out into deep water.
And the boat, the ship, of course, St.
Theophilact says to us that the boat symbolizes the Jewish faith at that time. The the teachers of the law toiled all night. They toiled for many years preaching the law which in fact saved nobody. When Christ died on the cross, he descended to the place of the dead to raise the righteous who could not enter into heaven before his incarnation.
And so too he arrives and at his appearance the fishermen who have toiled are able to cra c catch a great net of fish.
And of course so many that they can't bring in all the fish themselves. They need help. The apostles pointed presptors deacons.
And so it continues. Many have been brought into the church into salvation.
Jesus tells them to let down their nets.
The net of course symbolizes the gospel.
The fisherman's net is an ordinary simple thing, a humble thing because the gospel is composed of humility.
Humility. And it comes to us in simplicity. It reaches down to us in simplicities. The simplicity that even a child that can barely read can grasp great wisdom from the gospel.
Every one of us is touched when we open ourselves up to the gospel, the simplicity of the gospel. But when Jesus said to put out into deep waters, it reminds us that the gospel, though it comes in simplicity, has a depth that is inexhaustible.
We can spend the whole of our lives reading the church fathers and still discover new meanings, new interpretations, new symbolism that the gospel brings to us. Wisdom upon wisdom, inexhaustible.
But that depth, the deep waters also reminds us that many feel that they have sunk into darkness, into evil, into sin, that they they feel they can not possibly be saved. They lose all hope. Somebody who goes down to the very depths of the ocean can barely see the light of the surface.
They are plunged into darkness. And so it is spiritually for us.
When we fall so deep, we can almost lose sight of God's light. But we must never lose hope.
The depth of our fall is always equaled by the gospel. It reaches down to every one of us.
There is no depth beyond the reach of the gospel.
Every man is capable of being brought into the the net of salvation through the preaching of

the gospel.
No one is beyond reach. No matter how often we fall, no matter how deeply we fall, no matter how weak we realize we truly are, how sinful and unworthy we are, we must not allow the demons to deceive us into losing hope, it is a deception.
Everyone can be caught by the net of the gospel because the gospel reaches in simplicity into the ordinariness of our lives.

Antichrist and Prophecy

We're witnessing a slide into a global monoculture—a global monoculture. A world in which the values, the laws, the treaties that are signed transcend any decisions made by national governments, transcend the wishes, the traditions, the beliefs of any single national people, any nation.
An example of this recently was the case of Hungary, who opposed the enforcement of the LGBT agenda in its country. It didn't want what is called same-sex marriage. The EU took Hungary to the international court—the European Court of Justice. In fact, the EU withheld funding for healthcare in Hungary to force it to accept this aspect of the LGBT agenda. This is just one example. This creeping slide into monoculture, a single culture, is a deliberate enforcement of philosophies and beliefs of those who control the power, the wealth, and the influence of our planet.
Every revolution, every major social movement throughout history, has had a figurehead—somebody who personifies the beliefs, the philosophies of that movement. We think of France: it was Napoleon in their revolution. We think of Germany in the 1930s: Hitler. Even in America, George Washington, who became this figurehead for their revolution.
And so we may say globalism will also have a figurehead. A man will appear who will personify the philosophies, the ideas of globalization. That man will be Antichrist. Antichrist will appear to fulfill the desires and hopes of all globalists. He will unite their disparate aims.
Now, when we start talking about Antichrist, so often speculation begins, and the talk can become feverish, almost hysterical. It's very important that we maintain a sobriety in our thinking when we approach this subject. It is vital. Saint John Chrysostom gives us a very important quotation. Saint John Chrysostom says to us: "Do not seek clarity in prophecies where there are shadows and riddles. Just as in lightning you do not seek a constant light, but are satisfied that it flashes."

Saint John Chrysostom is saying prophecy is not given that we may apply it like a blueprint to work out a timetable for who the Antichrist will be, and when he will come, and where he will appear, and so on. We must reject all kinds of thinking in this way—that the timetable can be applied. We are not to look at the exact contemporary circumstances and events in the world and say, "Ha! See how it is fulfilling this prophecy and this prophecy." This is not the nature and purpose of prophecy, particularly when it comes to the Antichrist.
We are to take prophecy as a gift from God. God gives us prophecies not to work out a timetable, but that we may be comforted; that when these things begin—when we see these things happening—and trials begin, suffering, difficulties, when the Church is persecuted, we

are to look at these prophecies and be reminded that God saw, God knew, and all things happen according to His providence. Everything is in His hands. And when the world appears to be in chaos, and it threatens us, we must not fear; we must trust in God. This is why God has given us this prophecy.

Now, we have prophecies about the Antichrist, and there are specific things that we can know. But before we come to these, let's just pause and read that quotation from Saint John Chrysostom once more, just briefly, and then we will continue. Saint John Chrysostom warns us not to apply it too strictly or too exactly.

And yet we have many prophecies throughout history and from recent saints about the Antichrist, and— to avoid being led astray, to avoid being deceived—it's important we should know exactly what has been revealed, so that when Antichrist appears, if it's within our lifetime (it may be within our lifetime, it may not; it may be in another 500 years, it could be in the next 30 or 40 years), but when it happens, may we know enough to refuse—to refuse—the world's worship of Antichrist. For this is what prophecy tells us will happen. Antichrist will appear shortly before Christ's Second Coming, shortly before the very end of the world and the judgment for all people. Saint John the Apostle tells us that the whole world will be captivated by him. This is important for us to remember: the whole world around us—the vast, vast majority of people, and media outlets, news, people in our families, our work colleagues—will be captivated by Antichrist and his message. If we are to stand and refuse to worship him, then it will feel that we are just a voice crying out in the world. People will think we are mad.

Saint John tells us the whole world will be captivated—not only by his message, but by his works and by the wonderful things he does for humanity. He will hold authority over the whole world, and the world will give him that authority, believing him to be good.

Christ will not permit any of us to unwillingly worship Antichrist. So Satan will use deception. Just as Satan used deception in the Garden of Eden, so too he will continue to use deception to trick people into worshiping him, because he cannot force us.

Satan will use deception to mislead the nations. He will have fake, counterfeit miracles—signs of a false goodness, signs so convincing that the whole of the earth's nations will believe in him. And at first, he will not appear as a tyrant. If we look out for a man of evil, a man who is so full of corruption that he's causing terrible pain and suffering, we will not see Antichrist. We will fail to recognize him because he will come appearing as a true Christian. He will appear to the nations of the world putting right injustice. He will oppose injustice in all its forms. He will seem to be full of gentleness, full of kindness, full of forgiveness. He will appear to be filled with compassion for the world and its people, and the environment, and all these social concerns that people are being told are important.

There are many antichrists—those who oppose Christ—but the title "Antichrist," when we come to **the** Antichrist, means something specific. It means **in place of Christ**. The Antichrist will come *in place of Christ*. He will proclaim himself Christ, and he will be proclaimed Messiah by those who rejected the true Messiah. And he will be accepted as Christ by the whole world. He will proclaim himself to be God and worthy of the adoration that is due only to God.

This is how Antichrist will come to the world. And just as Christ came and established His true Church on earth for the salvation of mankind, so Antichrist will establish an imposter church—an imposter church that we must be able to recognize. The traits, the taste, the sign of this imposter church: one that tolerates all doctrines, that is inclusive of all beliefs and all people, whatever they believe. And we see preparation for this already in the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism prepares the way for Antichrist. We see it also in the World Council of Churches, where doctrine is put aside and the Christian faith is reduced to these basic elements—because they know what is important, of course, not the wholeness of the faith revealed by Christ and the Holy Spirit, but these few essentials, enough to "be a Christian."
Antichrist will not be Satan himself. There are many misconceptions about him, about his identity. He will not be Christ, and he will not be Satan himself, but a man entirely consumed by evil, a man from the people of the earth. Just as Christ came to be one of us, the Antichrist will be born of man but consumed by evil. He will, we are told, be hidden in his youth, and even in his later years his workings will be hidden until he is ready to appear suddenly on the world stage. He will appear, we are told, around the kind of age that Christ appeared for His earthly ministry. His public ministry. So too Antichrist will appear around this age.
And then, in the final stage of Antichrist's reign, he will reveal his true hatred of all humanity, but particularly of the Orthodox Church. Antichrist will turn his hatred, his contempt, his anger specifically towards Orthodox Christians. Now, this will last—this final period of his reign—for a maximum of three and a half years. But a number of saints have prophesied that in His mercy God will not permit it perhaps even to extend this long. The final stage of his reign will be hatred toward Orthodoxy.
But many, even within the Orthodox Church, will be led astray. We're told many will apostatize, many will abandon their faith, because a generation that seeks signs, a generation that seeks wonders, seeks evidence, seeks proof for its rational mind, will believe in the great signs and wonders, the marvels that Antichrist will perform in his mimicry of Christ. Many will believe. He will even appear, we are told, to raise the dead. He will appear to raise the dead through a mixture of demonic power and earthly technologies.
We are told that he will be seated and proclaimed God in the temple in Jerusalem. So either he will rebuild the temple or the temple will be rebuilt before him, and he will sit there expressing his power over all nations. It is there in Jerusalem, in the very temple that was originally built to the glory of God, which will be used by Antichrist for the glory of evil, and he will sit as God. And there, in his earthly power, he will institute a mark—a mark by which, unless we have it, man will not be able to buy and sell. For the faithful who refuse him, there will be hunger; there will be difficult times.
Saint Peter says: if possible, get a little bit of land. Learn to grow some potatoes, some vegetables. Packing away tins and packets of food is not enough, because these things perish. We need to learn to build, to feed our families, take care of ourselves. And we have seen, even in recent years, how quickly people will take things into their bodies in order to keep their jobs, and even in order to travel or take holidays. We won't say any more on that.
Those who follow Antichrist, we are warned, will consider themselves Christians. They will consider themselves to be the Church. And it won't be in the name of atheism that Antichrist rules; it will be in the name of Christianity—a Christianity that is fake, easy, a worldly Christianity that has lost its salt, its demands, its challenge.

The truth of Christ divides men, for many are unable to receive it. But the lies of Antichrist will offer a fraudulent unity, a superficial earthly, worldly unity—an inclusive unity that has no depth. It will have no spiritual reality. It will not be based on the truth and a shared faith. It will be a shallow, worldly unity that is celebrated by the nations of the world as an end to worldly divisions, an end perhaps even to conflict. The longing for utopia which is in many worldly men's hearts—for a longing for man-made solutions to the concerns and worries and struggles of mankind—this is what Antichrist will offer. Solutions to all those who long for these worldly utopian ideas will be satisfied with what Antichrist has to offer, for he will come and offer solutions for everything that we are told is important.

Everything that we are told is a threat—threats to the economy, to the ways we live, to the environment around us—Antichrist will have the answers. And those who seek earthly utopias will be satisfied with all that he offers. But those who still retain the truth of Christ, the truth of Orthodoxy, will know that the Kingdom of God is only to be found in the Church —not in the works of man, not in the governments and the social organizations of men, and the philosophers, and the social arrangements. Whether it be capitalism or communism, whatever it is that man offers will fail. It will fail. And if we put our trust and hope in these things, then we will be ready for Antichrist; we will receive him.

Time—time is moving to its end, constantly rushing. That end is drawing closer all the time. None of us knows how close it is now. And indeed for each of us, there will be death. That end is coming for every one of us, racing towards us. And before that end comes, we must guard ourselves. God gives us all these things that we may know. But it isn't enough to know in our minds that Antichrist is coming. We must live out the faith that God has given us. First, we must guard ourselves. We must not exchange the Kingdom of Heaven for the things of the earth. We must not consider even life itself in this world as any kind of goal. A longer life, more comfort, better years here on earth—these are not to be our goal as Christians. Only in the unchanging truth of Christ are we guarded, and only in the Orthodox Church will we find these unchanging truths. As the philosophers swirl, as the chaos begins to impinge on our lives, only in the truth of Orthodoxy can we find these unchanging values, unchanging truths—Christ Himself.

Only if we place our hope in Christ and attempt to be obedient to all He has given us, and that has remained unchanged for 2000 years, will we withstand, will we resist and recognize, and refuse to worship Antichrist.

The Last Days

Many of us can have a very distorted sense of time. Our experience of the years of our life can create a false sense of where we are in the order of things—in the order of God's plan, in the order of human history itself. Our experience of even a single year when we're young can be very different from when we grow older. And so, when people are warned that we are living in the last days, they may often sneer; they may say, "Well, I've heard this before. People have been saying this for decades, even for centuries." And of course, those people who have been saying it for centuries are right. They were right.

I'm 60 years old, and so it takes just 33 times my lifetime to go back 2,000 years. Thirty-three of my lifetime. My life seems like the blink of an eye, but just 33 times what I've lived takes us back to the time of the Incarnation. End to end, my lifetime—33—the blink of an eye.

In the 14th chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus tells us a parable of a man inviting guests to a supper. And the parable, of course, is a teaching of God's love for mankind and the Divine economy of salvation. But first we should notice that it is to **supper** that the guests are invited—not to breakfast, not to lunch, but to supper. Supper is the late meal; it is the late meal of the day. It signifies that Christ came into the world in the last days of mankind. He came, if we like, in the evening of the age. The Incarnation occurs at the evening of the age of mankind, and supper time signifies the appointed time, the proper time.

During the reign of Caesar Augustus, God discerned that the corruption of man had reached a point where sin had displayed itself in all its forms. Sin had come in all its forms—and of course, we see this continuing in our own age, our own day. It had reached a point, we may say, as in the days of Noah, that cleansing must take place. Cleansing. The devil has drawn mankind into his full measure of iniquity in readiness, of course, for the appearance of the Antichrist. And of course, the devil will do many terrible things through the Antichrist in the world, and there'll be great suffering, but we are talking about the iniquity that has grown in men's hearts—the iniquity to which we have willingly given ourselves, not just the suffering that the devil imposes and invokes in the world.

First of all, we mustn't be disheartened. The parable tells us that God's invitation is for all people. The first invited, who refused, represent the Jews. They refused to come to the feast. And so the servant is sent out; he is sent out with the instruction to go to the roads, to the hedges, to find the people—meaning the Gentiles, those who are out there. Those who reject the Divinity of Christ will not attend the feast. They will not attend the feast.

And Jesus shows us why it is they refuse the invitation. He lists, He details, what it is—the excuses they gave to refuse this invitation. We're told one bought a piece of ground and had to tend it. And of course the Church Fathers say this means those who are governed by the world—a piece of earth, a piece of land. They are governed by the world, by its thinking, by its logic, by its philosophy, and by worldly standards. Who can accept that a man has been born of a virgin? Where in worldly reasoning and logic does any of this make sense—that God would become man?

And then we are told by Jesus that one bought five oxen and gave his excuses. And again, the Church Fathers say these five oxen represent the five senses—the five physical senses of the body. It's a warning that we mustn't be yoked to the experiences of the body, both by its evidence and its pleasures and its comfort. If we are so concerned with the world, we will reject God's invitation to worship Christ. A worldly state of mind, an attachment to the world, will prevent us from worshiping our Lord.

The teachers, the scribes who rejected Christ, are then replaced with the poor, with the lowly of the world—those in the hedges and the roads. The Israelites were inside the city; they had been given the law of God, the Law of Moses. They had received this, but still they rejected God when He came to them.

The Gentiles—the Gentiles were strangers; they were foreigners. They were foreigners and strangers to the covenant that God was establishing with His people, but they became God's people in their response to His invitation. It was the poor and the lowly, the multitude of the world, that were given the opportunity to become the people of God. They were offered, they were given, this invitation. And of course, there were many amongst them too who would reject, who would refuse, and go on refusing.
God invites **us**, sinners, to His Kingdom, and it is our choice whether we will cling to the world, the flesh, to human logic, to human reasoning, or whether we will respond and enter into God's eternal feast.

How Demons Target You

We are wasting our time reading the great spiritual writings of the church fathers if we make no attempt to apply their teachings to ourselves. In fact, if we don't allow them to guide us in the spiritual life, then it can be worse than a waste of time because the demons can use our study to stir up arrogance and pride within us.
Everything that we read in about the spiritual life must be directed at ourselves, directed at our own condition, our own reality.
Anyone entering the spiritual life must understand it as warfare.
Warfare with the demonic forces. And anyone entering a battle does well to first know his enemy.
The church fathers have been victorious in the spiritual warfare.
And so they can teach us about the strategies of our enemies and how we can overcome them.
And this battle they tell us isn't something far off.
The spiritual battle isn't fought by attacking people and things outside of ourselves.
Spiritual warfare is fought within us here.
This is where we fight.
This is where the spiritual battle takes place within us.
And for this reason, the church fathers offer us an understanding of ourselves to a depth far greater than anything modern psychology or the invention of therapies and so on can ever do.
These modern ideas, these modern inventions merely skate across the surface of what it is to be a human being. It is in the church fathers that we discover the true depth and understanding of what it is to be human and how we fight evil. Of course, our thoughts like psychology, our emotions are connected are often a product of our spiritual condition.
And our healing is for the whole person.
But the true therapy of the soul is found within the mysteries of the church because it is only Jesus Christ who can bring healing to the soul.
So let's remind ourselves of some of the the basic principles that the church fathers teach us.
Well, first they say to us that we should be ready for the attacks of our enemy. We should never be caught off guard. We must look at ourselves and recognize those attacks that have happened and how they have come. Be watchful. never be caught off guard, particularly by those temptations that we know we are vulnerable to.
And this means learning to know our spiritual condition. Even just a little, even just a little

will help us.
The church fathers tell us that in every one of us there is a continuous war, a battle going on between two wills. the higher will, the the intelligent will and the lower will, which is the the carnal and passionate will. These two wills, the higher and lower, continuously battling within us, two parts of the soul that act in opposition to one another, that desire for good or evil.
But it's important we have this gift of free will.
This gift that enables us to choose.
Enables us to choose which it is we will follow.
Because the desires that arise in us, these these inclinations are not in themselves virtuous or sinful.
There may be something of good and evil about them but simply by the inclination and the impulse we have not committed a sin and we have not acted in a virtuous way. It is only through our our active free choice a free choice of good or evil that leads us to sin or develop virtue.
In fact, an inclination may be so terrible, we may be horrified that such a thought could pop up into our mind, something so abhorrent and hateful.
And the demons do these things to to rob us of our peace. But even something so shocking is not actually a sin in itself. It is only a sin when we incline towards it, choose it. We allow that fantasy to develop or we use our free will to choose that impulse. When we follow it, it's only then that it acts for or against us in the spiritual life. When we will, when we choose, the fathers warned us that when a a good desire or a good inclination has come to us, whether we suddenly feel a desire to pray or to forgive or love or or anything good, any good inclination, desire, it will always it will always be followed by an evil inclination. or desire. And we always have to remember this so that if suddenly we we felt this this warmth in prayer and a desire to pray when we've been kind to someone and truly forgiven them, this impulse to forgive, we mustn't then sit back and wallow in this feeling of virtue. We must be watchful. We must learn to watch and know that immediately an evil inclination will follow. We will be attacked.
This is why the church fathers say we must not be caught off guard. We must learn these things.
Victory or defeat in the spiritual warfare depends on our free will and the spiritual life. The the continuous battles we face are to choose good or evil, to reject that which is carnal and passionate and to embrace and follow that which is good.
And every impulse or desire that comes to us really seeks to draw the soul to itself.
Good and evil impulses in clations seek to draw the soul in that particular direction.
And then as we repeatedly choose good or evil, one or the other, the soul is changed.
The soul is changed by this pattern of choosing.
The following of good or evil desires or impulses transforms the soul and the soul is changed so that it begins to delight in good or evil.
The soul itself is affected by these things. And this is why of course over time when we are forced ourselves to pray by an act of will, prayer itself begins to become sweet.
And of course, somebody who has refused to repent, who has repeatedly chosen evil, only enters deeper into corruption, deeper and deeper into evil, ultimately to a point where

goodness itself may be utterly unbearable to the soul.
And so it is with the saints. evil sin becomes unbearable to that soul which is becoming purified.
And this is why a life of unrepented sin will make men reject God even when he's manifested in us all his glory. Because because the light and goodness of God will only repulse those souls that have been given completely to evil without repentance.
St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians tells us that we must walk in the spirit and this is the the struggle against our lower self, our lower will and orthodoxy alone that the Orthodox church alone has preserved the the ancient path to God, the the spiritual life revealed by our Lord to the apostles.
And this is why the aestheticism, the the sober inner life of the saints is the only path to victory and spiritual warfare.
We in the west must must reject our cultures doctrines, our cultures doctrines of self fulfillment, worldly happiness.
Because true joy can only be experienced in Christ. And we only draw close to Christ through repentance, through continuous struggle, through a continuous act of free will to choose good over evil, reject evil.
God's grace is the presence of the Holy Spirit.
When God sees our desire for him, when he sees our our willingness to struggle, he gives us the strength to fight, he gives us the the shield to defend ourselves. He gives us the the sword to strike our enemy, the devil.
We must learn from the fathers and and follow their path through the battlefield.
And we must watch ourselves, recognize the particular weaknesses that we are prone to. Because in each of us, the demons will find that open door, that place where our defenses are weak. Because no matter how strong we feel our walls are, there will be those places where the walls have not yet been built high enough. Those places where the the gate has not yet been locked. Those places where even the door has been left wide open in each of us. The demons know only too well those vulnerable, weak places.
So we must learn to to see ourselves in truth and the writings of the church fathers reveal this truth to others within the the mysteries and the life of the church the spiritual life of the church. The church fathers guide us into an awareness of the truth of our own spiritual condition.
So we must see ourselves in this truth and let us pray. Let us pray that God will strengthen us to reject that which is evil and to recognize and choose that which is Good.

Cross Burns the Demons

The saints teach us that the demons fear above all else three things. They fear holy baptism when we are washed clean of our sins, when we are united to the body of Christ. The demons fear holy communion. When we receive Christ, we we consume his body and his blood and we united to him and to one another in the church.
And the demons fear the sign of the cross.
In both the petristic and biblical writings, we learn that the the principal habitation of the

demons is in the air. what the church fathers refer to as the aerial realms.
And so when Christ was crucified, his cross was raised high into the air, demonstrating that his victory over evil was completed in the very place, the very stronghold of the demons.
When we make the sign of the cross on ourselves, of course, we receive Christ's blessing.
But also we commit ourselves to repentance to change both in mind and heart and and also through our actions.
We make the sign of the cross in faith committing ourselves to to self-denial.
It is self-denial that burns the demons because self-denial means showing no pity to ourselves.
Jesus said, "Whosoever desireth to follow me must take up his cross." And of course, when Jesus says, "Whosoever desireth," he shows that there is no compulsion here, God allows us free will. It is an invitation.
But whoever rejects the cross makes themselves unworthy to follow Christ. unworthy of Christ.
We are not the disciples of Christ if we reject the cross.
The cross is shame. The cross is rejection from the world.
The cross is pain.
St. Paul reminds us, I have been crucified so that it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me. Christ lives in those who are crucified. Crucified for him and for his gospel.
And by this we mean those who have struggled to crucify the passions within themselves.
This is self-denial. This is what burns the demons.
When Jesus taught this, he was telling us we must work to put the old man to death.
We must reject any man who who teaches a false gospel that abandons this command of Christ.
We must reject their false teachings.
These empty false gospels are demonic.
They lead those who may genuinely be longing for Christ.
They lead them to be the play things of the demons.
They lead the unwary to damnation.
Reject the false gospels of those who will tell you that you do not need to take up your cross, that you do not need to deny yourself, that you do not need to struggle against your passions.
It is an empty false gospel and it is a demonic teaching.
The cross, the cross is proof of God's love for us.
There is an account in the writings of Sultanistin that when he says that he was in the gulag, the communists had treated them savagely.
The the conditions were inhuman. And one day he sat contemplating suicide. He didn't know if he could continue. And another prisoner sat beside him and and secretly without the gods seeing drew the sign of the cross in the dirt before them and then quickly wiped it away so that the gods wouldn't see.
And Sultan Nitsen says that in that moment he remembered God's personal love for him.
And in that sign of the cross, he found the courage to face the savage conditions that the communists were imposing on them.
He had the courage to continue through the witness of the cross because the cross is a sign for all of us to keep struggling.

to keep struggling in our weakness, our inner weakness, but also from the weakness imposed upon us by the conditions and circumstances of our lives.
We must recognize the truth of our weakness and have the courage through the sign of the cross to continue and to struggle.
We must find the courage in God's personal love for us shown in the cross.
Because the cross is victory, but it is also suffering.
And we must learn to look beyond the cross to resurrection.
The cross, the cross is never to be seen in isolation.
We must always look to Christ's victory, to the to the salvation that the cross brings.
And so in the in the suffering of our lives, we must dare. We must dare through the cross, even in our suffering, to try and rejoice, rejoice in Christ's victory.
We must see beyond our immediate cross, our suffering, and never pres prevent our suffering from seeing the resurrection. We must never we must never look at our own suffering in isolation.
There is no meaning in our lives without Christ's victory. There is no meaning in pain. There is no meaning to anything in this world without the victory of Christ. It means nothing. We will die and it means nothing without resurrection.
And it is this victory that we must look to when in our ordinary lives our personal cross our suffering feels too great for us that we we fear the burden is so much we will collapse that we cannot carry on when it overcomes us. We must look to the cross must see the suffering of Christ and recognize the love of God for us personally in the suffering of Christ.
The promises of politics, the promises of social movements, materialism, all of it is empty. None of it can bring the comfort that our soul needs.
That we were created to find.
We were created to be in paradise with God. The world cannot offer this. The false paradise of worldly systems will tell us to run from pain. The false paradise that the world tries to bring and tries to build around us and within us.
We'll we'll bump.
It has no place in the worldly paradise.
It has no place in the heavenly paradise. But unless we endure the pain of this life, we will never find that eternal paradise.
Unless we make ourselves friends to the cross, then we cannot know Christ. We may we remain far from Christ. If we remain far from our cross, the pain of crucifixion is a necessary part of our disciplehip.
We will not be saved unless we are willing to take up our cross.
None of us.
But we must have no fear.
Look at the martyrs. We see in them the joy of Christ's victory even as their their earthly lives were taken from them for Christ, for the gospel.
Even as they were stoned, as they were crucified, as they were killed in so many terrible ways, we see in them the joy of the truth of resurrection, of the paradise to come, of the promises of Christ.
They knew the reality of resurrection even at that very moment of suffering and death.

So may God grant us grace to abandon this world.
May God grant us grace to follow Christ.

Battling Lust

In the battles with the passion of lust, there are a number of strategies, a number of ways we need to think. If our battle is to be successful, we need to reflect on ourselves—on what it is we're really feeling, what we're allowing to grow within us, and what it is we're doing.
Many times, people will excuse their lust, their passion, by blaming the women that they see in the street. "Oh, they wear clothes that are so different from the past. They dress inappropriately. It's summertime; look how they're dressing." Do we not hear in this excuse the voice of Adam when he said, "The woman that you gave me, she led me to sin"? We must take responsibility for our lust, for our passion, for the things that we do. We cannot go blaming others. When we confess, we're told never to confess the sins of others; it is always our own sins that we confess.
So what kind of confession is it when we say, "But it's their fault! Look how they dress"? And we must ask ourselves: if my mother, my sister, my daughter were to dress in this way, would it evoke these kinds of passions within me? Hopefully, most people would respond, "Of course not." Why then? Because already we feel differently towards these women than the women that we are allowing lust and passion to overcome us towards. Why? Because we love these people—we love these people truly: our sisters, our mothers, our daughters. We already carry in our hearts love for them.
And when we allow lust to overcome us towards some stranger, or even somebody we know, then it is a lack of love in our hearts. We must recognize it. It is a complete lack of love to turn somebody into the object of our lust, and we must repent of this—recognize that our hearts are unloving. We need to change how we feel—how we feel towards everyone, how it is that our hearts are experiencing other people. Is it love that we are allowing to grow within us? Is it the love of Christ, or is it something more, something different? And are we feeding this lust, this passion?
Nowadays, of course, many young men feel they are trapped by pornography. It's so available. And pornography, of course, as a number of recent fathers have said, is the iconography of the devil. It is evil, and it fuels evil within us. It fuels the passions; it fuels lust. It reduces all women in our mind and in our heart to something that gratifies our feelings. It reduces women in this way—human beings made in the image of God—into something that will satisfy our desires. Again, this is evil.
Saint Isaac the Syrian says to us: "Whoever does not voluntarily withdraw himself from the sources of temptation will involuntarily become the slave of sin, will be captured and taken away by sin." He says, then, let us look at what Saint Isaac the Syrian is saying here: if we do not voluntarily, if we do not choose to deny ourselves, to turn away from those things we know stir up the passions within us, then involuntarily, against our choice, we will be dragged away by sin. We will become slaves of sin; we will be captured; we will become servants of evil. We will find ourselves incapable of resisting sin, because we will become the slave of sin.

So we must first, as with all temptations—which must be cut off at the root before they begin to grow—voluntarily choose to deny ourselves, to reject those things that fuel temptation. And pornography fuels desire and lust; it fuels the passions. It drags us away into the clutches of the demons. Who among us would look at these defiling images if we could hear the cackles, the howls of laughter and delight of the demons when we do so? These things will enslave us—enslave us to the passions.

The fathers teach us that temptation—all temptation—comes in two ways: there is the outer and the inner. And Christ Himself, of course, was tempted, but He never allowed temptation to enter into Him. And we do this: we allow temptation to move from the outer to the inner when we engage with it, when we fantasize, when we gain pleasure from the images of that temptation, and it enters into us. Once temptation has entered into us, it is much more difficult to resist. So we must cut it off before we allow it to enter us. Do not fantasize. Do not engage. Do not allow pleasure to accompany these feelings of temptation. And we must confess. We must rush to confession.

The demons want to keep us silent about all these things: the sins we've committed, the ways that we're tempted, everything. Rush to your priest—confess it all. This is the first step in stamping our foot on the head of the serpent. Confess. Confess. This is where our healing lies. The whole mysteries of the Church, that life within the mysteries of the Church—that is where our redemption is, that is where our salvation is to be found.

When we overcome our pride, when we humble ourselves, when we speak aloud in front of our priest about those things that we have done, it is the first step in renouncing them. So rush to confession, and do not imagine that you are somehow bizarre or unusual in experiencing these things. There are many saints who struggled through this.

Certain saints, particularly, I encourage you to look at if this is the particular passion that you are fighting against. Go to the life of Saint Mary of Egypt, who went and fasted, renounced her life, and overcame this passion. Moses the Ethiopian, who suffered from the passions of both lust and violence, but is now a saint who stands before the throne of God. Saint John the Long-Suffering—look up his life—who became a monk and, even as a monk, was taunted and attacked. Even as a monk, Saint John the Long-Suffering found himself tempted by the passion of lust, yet he overcame it.

Do not lose heart. Do not believe that you will forever be enslaved by this passion. Christ promises release, but He wishes us to struggle, to repent. We must offer this struggle, this repentance, to God. And we must do so not simply to be released from a particular passion, but to bring down the idol of our own satisfactions—the idol of our own desires and pleasures. If we make an idol of our own pleasure, then this idolatry will separate us from God.

The Afterlife

We see the fear of death in how people live, how they react to disease, to old age. And of course, we only have to look at how so many people panicked when government stirred up fear over Covid and so on.

But Christians are not to share in this attitude towards physical death. We are to view death as the pagans and the atheists consider physical death.
But for many Christians, ignorance about what God has revealed to us about death leads them to deception, to be deceived.
They believe in purgatory. They believe in the the rapture. Such strange novel ideas that lead them astray that affect their their Christian lives.
So let's remind ourselves first of all of what it is the Christian faith teaches us about death.
Now first we must say paradoxically perhaps neither death nor immortality or natural to our our soul our condition.
Death of course is the fruit of our disobedience. Death is the consequence of sin and evil. It was never the will of God for us to die in paradise. It was introduced through our disobedience.
God did not create us to die.
But similarly, immortality is not ours by nature.
Immortality is a gift of God. It is through the grace of God that man is made immortal. Immortal.
So if God can make man immortal, why does he permit death to occur? Well, the church fathers tell us that if there was no physical death, then we would go on sinning forever, evil itself would become eternal. And if evil becomes eternal, then man can have no hope.
There would be no hope at all if we did not physically die.
When we when we normally talk about death, we we we are usually referring to physical death.
But the church fathers say that there is a form of death that is far more serious, far more serious than physical death. Spiritual death.
Spiritual death is the the sole separation from God.
God of course who is the source of life.
To be separated from God is to be separated from life.
And when we choose to unite ourselves to evil, we remove ourselves from God. We remove ourselves from the source of life.
Refusal to repent is spiritual death.
And this spiritual death, if we refuse to repent of our sins, becomes eternal.
Spiritual death becomes eternal when we refuse to repent. Now, of course, we all sin.
Every one of us.
But in his mercy, God has given us the means to return to him. To overcome separation. He has given us the gift of repentance.
Repentance is the means by which in Christ we return to God, the source of life.
I just remember the the parable that Jesus taught, the parable of the prodigal son.
When the the boy got up from the sty from the pigs and the filth and returned to his father, his father declared, "My son was dead and now he lives." He was dead when he dwelt in the st with the pigs and the filth when he sinned.
And in this act of repentance, he returned to his father. The father who represents God. Jesus is teaching us that it is this act of repentance that the father acknowledges that he now lives. It brings him back to the life of his father's home.
If we are unrepentant, if we remain in our sin deliberately, willfully, if we choose not to

return to our father's house, we remain filled with the passions and we join ourselves to those passions so completely that Jesus warns us that on the day of judgment, we will be cast out into outer darkness because we have already chosen to unite ourselves to evil, to darkness. ness the place of outer darkness is created by God for the punishment of the demons.
And if we remain unrepentant, we unite ourselves to the demons in this life.
If we don't struggle to turn away from evil, if we don't struggle to overcome temptation, we unite ourselves with the demons whose place is outer darkness.
And God's love doesn't push aside our free will. God respects our free choice, our free will.
God doesn't destroy free will on the day of judgment.
at our death.
At our death, it will be the free will of the unrepentant that separates them from God, that will lead them to punishment on the day of judgment. The choices we make, the free choices we make now in this life will bear fruit in eternal life.
Repentance is only possible because Christ has destroyed the power of death.
That final weapon, that ultimate weapon that the devil could use over us. Christ died and descended to the place of the power of death.
And it was the very presence of Christ that annihilated the devil's weapon.
Because the presence of Christ is life.
To be united to Christ is to be filled with his life.
Christ released us from the bondage of death by dying and rising.
And of course by doing so by being resurrected he lifted our humanity in resurrection. the humanity that he took on himself in the incarnation.
St. John we read again and again every year he says death took a body and lo it found God.
Death took a body and lo it found God.
Every person, good or evil will be raised on that final day, raised for judgment.
And we will be judged as whole people.
God created us in both body and soul. A unified whole.
Physical death introduces an unnatural separation between the body and the soul.
And so we will be united, resurrected.
Every man, every man who has ever lived in every generation, the earth, the earth is almost pregnant, waiting for that moment when every man who physically died will rise from the dust and ashes of the earth from which he was first created.
And the saints at that moment will shine with the glory of God. Their their physical bodies were will reflect the condition of their soul.
Like Christ on Mount Tabor, his very flesh, his clothes were illuminated with the glory of God, the unccreated light of God. And so to the saints will be filled and will shine forth with this light at the resurrection.
But for the unrepentant, their bodies too will reflect the the condition of their soul, the now eternal condition of their soul.
They use their free will to introduce this evil into themselves.
And they will physically be seen gloomy and dark, united. united with darkness and evil.
So long as we cling to the things of this world, then death will have something to steal from us. And so long as we cling to the things of this life and this world, there will always be a fear, a fear when physical death approaches, because there is something it can take from us.

But when we live for the kingdom of God, the eternal life to come, physical death in this world can take nothing from us.
Which is why the re the martyrs rushed to give away their life for Christ. They understood that in order to die in this world, their physical bodies had to die that they could enter the eternal life, the eternal joy of God's kingdom.
Love of this life brings suffering. It brings panic when we die.
And when we die, the soul will remain filled with the passions that we have chosen not to repent of. And we will enter into that new condition, still filled with the passions. And we will continue to be attacked just as the demons attack us in this life in this world.
At that moment of separation, the demons will rush to attack. They will even try to lay claim to possess the soul.
They will recount all those sins that have not been repented of.
They will scream in delight at the passions that they see in the soul.
And they will try to lay claim. But the the righteous, those who have sought Christ and repented will be guided by the angel angels through that difficult journey after death.
Before he was crucified, of course, Jesus said that when he died, even he the demons in this world would would rush to lay claim to him, but they would find no sin in him.
how many sins they will find in us.
But if we are repentant and if we seek the mercy of God, his angels will guide us. They will protect us. They will speak out on our behalf.
And then immediately following this, every soul will have a foretaste of what is to come eternally. Our conscience will will speak out in such an unbiased way. We will know in that moment the true condition and what we have done with our lives on this earth.
Whether we tried to be obedient, whether we've tried to repent or whether we've given ourselves to the temptations, the passions, the things of this world, we will know the justice, the justice that is coming on the day of judgment.
And in anticipation of that moment, anticipation of that day of judgment, the soul will enter a state of unimaginable sorrow or unimaginable bliss and joy, a foretaste of heaven or punishment.
Christians are called to live in hope.
hope based in the love of God, the mercy of God. For those who try to be obedient, those who try to repent, who take up this free gift of God, of repentance, that recognize his love and recognize the evil of the passions and the temptations and the passing fleeting things of this world.
Our joys, our sorrows in this life will all fade away. Our pains will all fade away. Knowledge of death must be for us a shield against the vanity and the deception of this life.
The knowledge of our death must not be something to cause us great grief, but it should inspire us to seek God in this life, to unite ourselves with the life of Christ, and to hold that shield of death, the knowledge of death as a reminder of the passing nature of all things in this world. Everything will pass away. We must cling to nothing before God.
Let God be our heart's true desire.
Let us take up this gift of repentance that when we physically die, we will know the joy of anticipation of the eternal kingdom of God.

Faith or Fear

In the 14th chapter of the Gospel of St.
Matthew, we read the event of Jesus walking on the water when the disciples are caught in a boat out in a storm. If we work our way through the details of Matthew's account, we learn the significance of many of the small details, but also the message of encouragement.
The encouragement to face our fears, even our terrors in this world. So, first of all, St. Matthew tells us that Jesus went up the mountain to pray. He sent them onto the boat out into the lake, but he himself withdraws to pray.
He sets us an example that we are to be undistracted, find times of silence in order to pray.
But he put not only permits them, he sends them out into the water knowing a great storm is about to engulf them. We may ask why. Why would Jesus do this?
There are many reasons. First, Jesus is teaching the disciples endurance.
He's teaching them to learn courage and faith to place their trust in him and that they may know his power that they may witness this great miracle. And so it is for us. So often we may look at the details of our lives and cry out to God and say, "Why? Why would God allow these things to happen to me?" But God calls us to respond with endurance, with faith, and with courage.
We must face our lives with courage. The courage not just in ourselves and our own ability to put things right, but a courage that comes from faith in Christ.
Knowing that he is the only way that our problems can be faced and resolved.
Perhaps not even resolved in this world, but resolved.
And then St. Matthew says to us that Jesus appeared to them at the fourth watch.
Again, this is important. Jesus has stayed back. He hasn't even come to them. The first, second, or third watch, the night is almost over. And then Jesus comes to them.
How often when we're afraid, when we face our struggles, how often we cry out to God and our expectation that he will respond immediately, that he will put things right exactly as we want them and when we want them.
And clearly the message here for us, we must endure and be patient.
We must anticipate God working in his own time, not according to our timetable and the way we would have it.
this issue of the fourth watch. The soldiers of the day divided the night into four watches, four sets of three hours.
And so Jesus comes almost at daybreak which of course is significant in itself.
The meaning of the watches as well has a symbolic significance. St. Theophilac says to us, the first watch symbolizes the covenant that God made with Abraham.
The second watch symbolizes the law given to Moses. The third watch, the prophets.
And then finally, the fourth watch, the coming of Christ, the incarnation. And then daylight.
And when Jesus arrives, he walks on the water. Of course, he he has authority and power over the very thing that threatens us. The very thing that the disciples are afraid of, he has command and power over.
When he gets there, Jesus calls Peter out of the boat and Peter jumps and he's able to walk on the water.

So often we remind ourselves, of course, of the great authority of Christ in this moment, but that which threatens them, Jesus doesn't just walk on it himself.
He places it beneath the feet of his disciple.
Let us be encouraged by this. Those things that frighten us, that threaten to engulf us. The the darkness of the world at times that makes us afraid, Christ has the authority and power to place it beneath our feet, beneath our feet.
And then St. Peter notices, he becomes aware of the wind and the the sea and he becomes afraid and begins to sink. And Jesus permits this for a moment, perhaps to help him avoid pride when he gets back in the boat with the other disciples.
But of course, it's it's a prefiguring of his denial of Christ as well. As he sank, so he denied.
But when Jesus responds to him, when he cries out to Christ, what does Jesus do?
Does he rebuke the wind and the waves?
No. He rebukes Peter. He says, "You of little faith." The issue here is not really the storm and that which Peter perceives to be the threat. The issue here is his faint-heartedness, his lack of faith.
And so too with us in our lives, the struggles we face, the things that make us afraid and anxious, the things that may lead us to despair at times.
The issue is not those external circumstances in our lives.
It is our faith. It is our lack of faith at times. This is the issue. This is the problem. This is why we sink. And we feel that we may be engulfed at times because our faith is weak. And so Jesus rebukes him. But then he cries out. He cries out even when he is afraid in this moment. He knows he must cry out to the one who can save him. However weak our faith may feel, always cry out to Christ. always.
And then St. Matthew tells us that Jesus got into the boat and the apostles worshiped him. They worshiped him.
They recognized him as God. For no one can be worshiped but God. They knew this. Why? Why? Jesus had previously before they left the shore fed the crowds with a few fish and a bit of bread and they didn't see the full significance of this. But now they recognize him. Why this miracle and not the other?
Because they recognize that here is one even greater than Moses. This is truly God. How can they see this? Let us remember Moses when he led the Israelites out of slavery. He prayed, but the shore and God separated the water and they were able to walk on dry land.
Christ does not need to pray. He has authority and power in himself and he doesn't need to walk even on dry land.
He walks on the water. Here is one greater than Moses, greater than all the prophets. This is God in the flesh. And they worshiped him. They recognized him.
And this whole event of course is full of significance for our lives when we are filled with terror and fear or just anxiety and nervousness, worry because the night, the darkness and the storm itself symbolize those things that that threaten us and the darkness in our own lives. Christ has the authority and power to overcome everything in our lives that makes us afraid.
And this detail of the watch, the fourth watch, places this event specifically in a moment in time. And time is important for the significance of this event because it reminds us that our terror and that which causes us terror is temporary. It is a moment in time. It may be for many years. It may be till the day we die, but it is a temporary thing in time.

But the salvation of Christ is eternal.
His comfort, his power, his authority is eternal.
He calls us to the peace and the security of his eternal kingdom.
Let us remember the darkness, the fears of this world will be placed by Christ under the feet of those who have courage and who cry out to him in faith.

Holy Spirit Can Unshackle Your Soul From the World

As we read the Gospels, every word that Jesus speaks, every encounter that he has with each of these people is laden with meaning. Nothing is insignificant.
Nothing is placed there by accident.
Everything is full of meaning. Meaning in terms of our own lives and our understanding of God. Our whole spiritual pursuit is explained is is revealed there in Christ's encounters. And of all the encounters that Jesus has, one of the most important is what we call the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman. So let's think about how St. John in that fourth chapter describes this encounter that Jesus has and what it is the church fathers tell us is to be learned from this encounter. And the first thing St. John tells us is that Jesus was wearied. Jesus was wearied. In this we learn that Jesus walked everywhere as he walked through Palestine. He didn't even ride a donkey.
He lived in complete simplicity. A simplicity that we must compare to our own lives. Perhaps we need look no further than the car parked outside our house or the cars outside the church. How much do we really need? When we consider our next purchase of anything, do we really need it?
This event calls us to the simplicity of Christ to reflect the simplicity that Christ lived in our own lives. Always question, do I really need this or do I have enough? And again, the church fathers teach that Jesus was wearied because he was truly human. This is God in the flesh. He's truly entered our humanity and he then faces the the limits of his human strength. Each of us has frailty, weakness. It is a reminder to us that when we reach the limits of our physical strength, it isn't a sin. Christ himself was wearied. He tired. He thirsted. He faced it. He faced these human weaknesses and he was without sin. So when we attempt to do more than we are physically able, let us remember that it is not a sin to say I can do no more. I've reached my limit. And then Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman. And we should say something more of the the Samaritan woman in a moment.
But Jesus begins to speak to her and asks her for water and then tells her that he would give her water from which she would never thirst again. Of course, this water, the church fathers tell us, symbolizes the Holy Spirit, the life of the Holy Spirit.
Water, a symbol both of cleansing and also refreshment. Nothing very much lives out in the desert. Here we are in the lush woodlands of Wales where the rain produces such fertility where God blesses this land. We go out to the desert, that dry, arid place, a reminder to us that our soul can be a dry arid place where very little bears fruit. But the Holy Spirit brings fertility to the soul to bear fruit. And Jesus says this water isn't like a still pond. It is alive. It will gush gush up. The church fathers say this this image of the water rising gushing up is a reminder to us that through the Holy Spirit the soul may ascend may ascend to the heavens to

God himself. It will clear it will clean. It will refresh and it will raise the soul.
The Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will be given by Christ to us that we may ascend to God himself. And we may drink. The church fathers say we may drink not simply to quench our thirst, but that this water may overflow in our lives, may may refresh others, may bring life to others through us.
The Holy Spirit isn't simply a gift for us to satisfy our needs, our desires, but as a means of meeting the needs of those around [Music] us. And then Jesus says to the woman, "Call your husband. Call your husband." A glimpse of his prophetic vision. He knows all through his prophetic vision as a human being.
However, he even sees that she has been married many times.
And at first the Samaritan woman tries to conceal tries to conceal her sin. But then when Jesus says, "You speak correctly. You have no husband because you've been married five times." She doesn't have a sense of guilt and shame and try to run to flee.
She senses in Christ that he speaks these things without condemnation. Christ speaks and sees her sin. But at that moment there is no condemnation him in him. He speaks to her to call her forth to to acknowledge to recognize the truth. Call your husband. He says she doesn't run away. She marvels. She marvels at who this is who speaks to her. She recognizes something at this stage of a prophet. This is all she can recognize at first. But Jesus begins to lead her forward to help her to recognize who he is. Now the five husbands, the five husbands can have many meanings.
The Samaritans, of course, were originally Gentiles that had moved into the area after Jews had been carried off into slavery, and they only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, the law, the the Torah, and so on. This was their acceptance of the Jewish teaching, and no more. And so the five husbands some people have argued could be this link with being a Samaritan. But the church fathers say there is a much greater deeper meaning than this. The five husbands, the sinful relationships signify the five senses. The five senses through which the soul can be shackled to the earth, to the things of this world, the material world. And so through her encounter she has the possibility as we all do of being unshackled, freed. The soul may be freed from s simply the sensory experience of this material world. Our soul may ascend to another world to a different experience.
And so Jesus offers her freedom as he continues to offer us freedom to release us from this slavery, slavery of the material world.
And Jesus says to her, of course, he says, "We will go on to worship in spirit and in truth." In spirit and truth. Not just as the Samaritans do on the mountain or as the Jews do in Jerusalem, but in spirit and truth.
To worship in spirit means beyond the lips, beyond even our worship. But the kind of worship that changes our whole lives. It is a an active worship. The church fathers say it means cultivating the virtues in our lives, repenting of our sins, worshshiping in spirit, but also in in truth. Of course, Jesus knew only too well that there would be fake false gospels that would come that would delude and lead people astray. And so he says, "We will must worship in truth, in orthodoxy, the fullness of truth, true worship." And as Jesus leads the Samaritan woman on in her understanding, he then says, "I am he. I am the Christ." He announces to this woman that he is the one that they are waiting for and looking for. This woman who isn't even a Jew, Christ reveals his identity as the Messiah, the son of God.

So many Jews previous to this had challenged him. Are you the Christ? They they challenged they questioned him. Are you the Christ? As if to catch him out. Admit admit to this and we've got you. And to them he remained silent. He refused to tell them who he was. But this woman whose heart is genuinely seeking the truth, whose desire is truly for God, he reveals his identity. I am the Christ. I am he. And of course, because her heart is open, she immediately believes. St. John says she immediately believes and went and told the people of her town. She abandoned her pot by the well. She has come out in the heat of the day. There are those who thirst. She may thirst herself. And yet suddenly she recognizes something far greater than her chores. The demands of the world and ordinary life. Here is something that must be professed, shared immediately as more important than everything else. She abandons everything, all her worldly concerns. There is a time for all of us when our worldly concerns must be abandoned. But this is not an excuse to abandon our families, our children.
We must face up to our responsibilities to other people. But sometimes we must not allow our worldly concerns to ever get in the way of what the gospel calls us to.
And for her it meant to immediately go back to town to tell her neighbors, her friends, her family, I have found him, the one we have waited for, the Christ. She tells the whole city and they come out and they question and they listen and he spends two days there. And St. John says to us that many believed, many came to believe in who Christ was after just two days. after so many miracles and so much teaching amongst the Jews. So many of whom then rejected him and eventually put him to death, persecuted him. Jesus spends just two days amongst the Samaritans and they come to believe.
And then when the disciples return to him, and they wonder why he's speaking to the Samaritan woman, he goes on to explain to them, I must finish the work my father has given me. Finish the work. By work, of course, Jesus isn't simply meaning he must die and be resurrected. His death and resurrection is part of what he must do.
But the work that Jesus now refers to is us, man. We are the work of God which Jesus must complete, finish. He must finish his father's work, mankind. Yes. Die and be resurrected and ascend and take our humanity to the very throne of God. So that we may be transformed. We may be changed. We may be deified. we may have the image and likeness of God restored within us. That which we have defiled through our sin restored through the working of the Holy Spirit in us and our faith in Christ and our repentance and our struggle. We are the work that Christ must finish and we must cooperate. We must drink of this water that he offers us as the woman at the well did. Those of us who know our church history of course and I would assume all orthodox know that this woman went on to be sentini equal to the apostles in many of the early sermons of the church fathers. This woman who not only evangelized her own town but went on and toured and told people everywhere she traveled about Christ. She took her youngest son and and her five sisters traveled with her even to Rome where she confronted Nero. Nero, the most dreadful, powerful man at that time, persecuting the church. And in her fearlessness and her love of God, she went before Nero and confessed her faith. And in his fury, he had their hands beaten, beaten with iron rods for hours and hours upon time.
But the wounds didn't cause any harm. Their hands were not damaged. They felt no pain. And so eventually he tried to tempt them with gold and luxury and even sent his daughter to tempt St. Fini away from her faith. But instead, St. Fini converted Nero's daughter to the

Christian faith.
And in his fury, he eventually had St. Fini's sisters beheaded. He tried to poison St. Futini. Just as she had drunk from the well that Christ draws from, she had drunk the water of the Holy Spirit. Now Nero tried to poison her, but the poison had no effect on her. He tried to kill her by throwing her down a well. See how God works. The mystery of God in all these things, the prophetic nature of how God works in our lives, revealing slowly, so often God will work in our lives and we don't even see or understand what's happening.
Sometimes, occasionally later, we may look back and recognize what God has done. But very often, we we have no idea. There is so much we have to give thanks for. So much that we are unaware of that we should give thanks for all those things we we don't understand, we don't see, we don't recognize. And let us give thanks for the witness of St. Fertini. And may we like her drink of the living water. And may the Holy Spirit enable us to struggle that the image and likeness of God may truly be restored within us.

Death to the World

We are social creatures, and we're brought up to try to fit in with the people around us. As a result, we share all kinds of moral and cultural values, and we learn these things. These things are not always negative; in fact, they can often contribute to our spiritual growth and spiritual condition. If the culture around us is Christian, it can be of enormous benefit to us.
But there comes a point for every Christian, both as an individual and as a member of the body of Christ—the Church—where we recognize how far the world around us has abandoned Christ. In fact, here in the West, we recognize that the culture around us has not only abandoned Christ but has become hostile to Him. We in the UK live in a culture that is hostile to Christ, both in law and in culture itself.
In this realization, we must make a choice: the world or Christ. We must choose. Do we follow the world, or do we follow Christ? This is a choice that we must keep making constantly—every day—as we encounter people, as we encounter the signs and the influences of this culture, as we interact with the world around us. It is a choice that affects our salvation.
If we try to make our faith contemporary, or even, as some like to call it, "relevant" to the world's mindset, then we will lose our souls. We will lose our salvation. We must think about the words of Jesus in the Gospel of St. John, chapter 10. There, Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd—not just a shepherd, of course, but the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down His life for His sheep.
Jesus both taught and demonstrated, in the way He lived, what it means to live with contempt for death in this world. How can we live this way if we still cling to the external things of the world? It is madness. By "external things," of course, we do not just mean possessions or wealth, but also status and the world's approval. If we cling to external worldly approval, which we are often brought up to seek, then we put our souls in danger. We will always love either the world or Christ more than the other.
We must look at ourselves and ask: which does my heart, the way of my life, truly pursue—is it Christ or the world? Of course, none of us can truly know, even in our own hearts, how

deep our love for Christ is until it is tested. It is easy to think we love Christ, that we would die for Christ, even while we are safe and comfortable. But when the world demands that we deny our faith, when the world demands that we stop worshiping, close our churches, or change our worship, it is then that we see ourselves in truth.
God has permitted, in recent times, a small taste of this. Jesus says that His sheep go in and out of the Sheepfold. The Church Fathers tell us that this relates to man's twofold nature: he goes in to care for and nurture his inner life, and he goes out to repent of his evil actions, to mortify the flesh. Jesus warns that the wolves seek to attack the sheep. The wolves, of course, represent the Devil Himself, but also those forces in the world that are demonically inspired.

The forces of the world work for Satan, against Christ, and attack the Church, attacking the Christian faith. Christ, our Shepherd, has given us everything we need to defend ourselves against the wiles of the world: His Commandments, His example, and the Holy Mysteries, through which we are strengthened. The Holy Spirit, received through Holy Baptism and Chrismation, enlightens and fortifies us so that we may defend ourselves against the wolves of this world.
Yet, despite all of this, souls continue to perish. Sheep continue to be stolen and killed by these wolves when the sheep abandon their Shepherd. When the sheep seek their own paths, they become like goats. When the values and morality of the world demand change, some sheep will leave the Sheepfold. They will adapt, and the wolves will feast on them.
Jesus says that He knows His sheep, and His sheep know His voice. This is because He is always close to us. His sheep hear and listen to His care; they distinguish between truth and the lies of the world—the lies that call evil good and good evil. When the world calls immorality something to be celebrated, when even idols and demons are recognized by the world as roads to salvation, Christians must separate themselves from the world for the sake of their soul and for the sake of their salvation.
False shepherds lead their flocks into hell. The world is full of false shepherds. We see thousands upon thousands of different Protestant denominations, each with different versions of the truth, teaching this or that, and leading their sheep astray—leading those sheep away from their true Shepherd. Sheep who sincerely seek Him, who sincerely long for Him, can yet be betrayed by these false shepherds.
But so long as those sheep want to fit in and be acceptable to the world, they will continue to be seduced. We bear personal responsibility for this. We will be judged for seeking relevance to the world. In doing so, we become blind to the reality that there is nothing more relevant than our salvation, nothing more universal than the need for Jesus Christ for salvation.
Let us, therefore, hear and listen to our Shepherd, and let us have no fear or concern for the rejection of the world.

Too Sinful to Be Saved ?

As we grow in our awareness of our sinfulness and our unworthiness before God, we must also grow in discernment about the true nature of the evil within us and the depth of our sin. The devil will try to tempt us, telling us that we are so unworthy, so sinful, that it is

impossible for us to be forgiven, impossible to return to God. It is easy to fall into this trap when we reflect on the ways our lives have been filled with sin and evil. The devil will say, *"Look at this—how can you possibly expect God to receive you after all of this?"*
But Jesus calls us to reject this temptation—it is a demonic deception. In the 15th chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus teaches the parable of the Prodigal Son. The sinful son in the story represents not just humanity as a whole, but each of us individually. He goes to his father and says, *"Give me my share of the inheritance."*
All of humanity has been granted by God this great blessing: to be unlike any other creature on earth. Unlike animals, we are created in God's image. We have been given the Logos, free will, the capacity to reason, to make choices. Humanity has received this inheritance—this gift from God.
For those of us who are baptized Orthodox Christians, we have received an even greater wealth: the treasures of God's grace through Baptism and Chrismation. Yet, like the prodigal son, we can squander that which our Father has given us. Even as we repent, sin remains within us; we continue to live in ways that betray the grace we have been given.
The prodigal son's leaving of his father represents the choice of independence. Whenever we choose our own will over God's will, whenever we act in disobedience to God, we have left our Father—we have left our spiritual home. This is an act of rebellion. And spiritual rebellion always results in suffering. Alienation from God brings suffering to the soul.
Jesus says that the prodigal son *"came to his senses."* Living lives consumed by sin is a form of madness. We lose moral judgment, the ability to see, think, and discern truth. Sin clouds the mind and enslaves the heart. But when the prodigal son comes to his senses, he recognizes his need.
He was living among swine—unclean, filthy animals—but his real need represented the emptiness within us when we alienate ourselves from God. The soul is made for union with God, and when we live apart from Him, we are unfulfilled, empty, and in need. Separation from God can never satisfy the longing of the soul, for it is created to be in communion with Him.

Of course, very often we try to fill this emptiness with worldly things: pleasure, status, relationships, wealth, possessions, worldly acclaim, and so on. Yet at the heart of all these things remains the same emptiness.
Even when we look at the wealthy and the rich, we may sense that within them there is still a cry: *"I am in need, I am in need, I am in need of God."*
In the parable, the father represents God. He gives us a glimpse of the limitless love and mercy of God, always looking for the return of His son, ready to rush out, embrace, hold, kiss, and celebrate the return of the lost one—just as the angels rejoice. God is waiting for every one of us to repent. He watches with mercy for the opportunity to welcome us home and grant us His grace.
The whole Incarnation of Christ is itself a manifestation of God's love. Every word, action, and event in the life of Christ demonstrates God's care and mercy for humanity. We must not doubt the depth and the limitlessness of this love.

The sinful son returns. If he had remained in the filth, among the pigs, he would never have known the embrace, the welcome, and the mercy of his father. His return is an act of repentance.

We must understand: it is not enough to simply believe that God loves us. If we do not repent, if we do not begin the journey back to our Father's house, we will not experience His embrace, mercy, and forgiveness. Faith must be living, producing the fruit of repentance in our lives—a genuine return to God.

The father orders the fatted calf to be slain so that the son may feast. The Church Fathers remind us that the fatted calf symbolizes Christ in Holy Communion. As we enter the Church and repent, we are called to feast on Christ Himself, who enters us and unites Himself with us in Holy Communion.

Yet the older brother remains outside, sullen and resentful: *"Why have you done all this celebrating for him? I have been with you all this time and you have never celebrated with me."*

The Church Fathers teach that some may interpret the two brothers as representing Jews and Gentiles, or older and younger sons. But fundamentally, this is a warning to the Pharisees—those who would limit God's love and forgiveness. By refusing God's mercy, they place themselves outside the house.

The parable reminds us that the first shall be last. God's love and mercy are capable of drawing everyone to Himself—including each one of us.

We must resist the demonic whisper that says: *"Not you, not me… look at the depth of my sin, I am the worst."* God knows the full depth of our sin, the full depth of our rebellion, and yet He waits, opens His arms, and calls us to Himself.

We must hear His call, trust in His mercy, and by trusting in that mercy, we may have hope.

The Final Judgment

Each year, as we prepare to enter Lent, the church calendar sets before us the theme of the Last Judgment. It calls us to sober reflection on the events that are awaiting all of us. It's important that we don't speculate, speculate about the Last Judgment. Speculation only leads to false ideas, to heresy, and of course, there isn't any need to speculate. Jesus, in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, sets out in detail clearly what the events will be on the day of judgment. Jesus gives to us, in His mercy, a warning of what is to come. First, He says He will come in glory. He tells us He will come in glory to distinguish the Second Coming from the first coming. At His first coming, the Incarnation, Jesus came in humility. He suffered the indignity of the violence and the murder at the hands of men. But at the second coming, He will come in glory. He will be attended by the Angels. The whole world will see Christ. It will be a completely different event to anything that has gone before, and so it's beyond human imagination. No one can picture and imagine this extraordinary event, this inspiring event, that's about to take place in all of our lives. He sets out for us clearly what we should expect. He says, first of all, He will divide the Saints and the Sinners, and the Saints He will call to be at His right hand. This happens at judgment. This separation of the Saints and the Sinners will not take place until the day of judgment. It is important that we

understand this because there are false teachers in our world who take the unwary and tell them that there will be a prejudgment Rapture, where God's Saints will somehow avoid the suffering of this world. This is a demonic trick. We must reject this. The Saints and the Sinners will remain together until that moment of judgment, when Christ Himself will separate them. And then there is a beautiful detail. Jesus says, having separated the Saints and the Sinners, He will turn and He will speak to the Saints, because He knows His sheep. The shepherd knows His sheep, and the sheep know His Shepherd. They are familiar; they will hear that voice that they already recognize. What joy there will be for those who hear those words of Christ in that moment, because it's a moment of intimacy and closeness. And then we are told that the Saints are those who have yielded fruit, the fruit that Christ has called for in our lives. It will be there, and Jesus says, "I recognize my sheep," my sheep, of course, not the goats that take the pathways of their own choosing, the unruly paths, as the fathers call them, the unruly paths of the goats. The sheep have been obedient, and they have borne fruit in their lives. Jesus tells that only after judgment will punishment or reward be given, only. And there are two things that we must recognize in this. First of all, the Saints tell us that the dead do indeed have a foretaste of what their eternal reward will be, because in this life we enter into a spiritual condition, a spiritual condition that we carry over through death, and so it will be right that we have a foretaste of what that will be. But the judgment has not yet occurred, and so there can still be hope for our loved ones. The Saints encourage us to pray, intercede for those who are dead and waiting for judgment, because they can plead and pray no more for themselves. They need our prayer, and it's important that we see that no one has a reward or punishment until this judgment occurs.

It's an encouragement to us to think carefully about how, how quickly we jump to punish people without truly reflecting and understanding a situation. But this is not the case for the final judgment. Christ's judgment will convince every human heart of the right of the justice of whatever it is we receive. Everything will be open, nothing will be hidden in our lives, and in the judgment of Christ this careful examination of every one of us will be right and true. Nothing will be hidden. And Jesus says the Saints will be called blessed, blessed because they are acceptable to the Father, and so they will not just receive, Jesus says, but inherit the kingdom of God. They will become co-participators in the glory of God, which is an extraordinary thought in God's own glory. And Jesus then tells us that the Saints will be shown the nature of the fruit that they have borne in their lives. He will say, "You were merciful to me, you visited me, you gave me food when I was hungry," and so on. And Jesus, describing this, reveals their humility, the condition that they are truly in, because they will say, "When did we do this?" They almost refuse to accept that they have done any good. But Christ says, "You did this when you did it for the least, when you visited the poor, the sick, when you did these things for the weakest and the lowest of the earth, you did it for me." But then Jesus warns us of something quite terrifying. He says, at that point, He will command the Sinners with the most terrifying words. He will say, "Depart from me, depart from me," and the Condemned will go with the demons. God has not created hell and prepared this place for humanity; hell is prepared for the devil. But we, using our free will, may choose to unite ourselves to evil. In this life, we may become of one mind, likeminded with the demons. We have already united ourselves in this life with the demons and so make

ourselves worthy of the same punishment that they will receive. Such a terrifying thought: "Depart from me." And there is no claim then beyond this final judgment.
But those who serve God in this life are already close to Him, even beyond their understanding. They are already close to Him. And when we fall in this world, the demons rejoice. The demons rejoice over every sin, every act of evil that we fall into, because they hate us. They want us condemned, because they see the image of God within us. But the Angels rejoice over every sinner who repents, every sinner who turns away from evil. There is rejoicing in heaven. The Angels long for us to enter eternal glory and joy, but the demons want us condemned, and we choose in this life who we will be with, who we are joining ourselves with.
Describing the events of the Last Judgment, Jesus tells us Saints are truly those who will experience a joy beyond everything in this world. There is no joy, but there is no sorrow either, for the Condemned who hear this final judgment. It's important also that, when we look at how Jesus describes His judgment on that final day, He doesn't describe Himself as condemning anyone for committing this sin or this sin or this evil. But in fact, if we look at the words of Jesus, what condemns us is our refusal to do good. You didn't visit the sick, you didn't share what you had, you didn't feed the hungry. It is even the refusal to do good that will condemn our hearts, not just a catalog of evil. And then Jesus makes it clear that both the joy of the reward for the Saints and the punishment for the Sinners will be eternal. There will be no end. The condition we enter into once judgment is made will have no end. He says, He uses the words, "It will be everlasting." Again, it's important for us to hold on to this truth because there are heretics in the world who teach about purgatory, about a temporary stage. This is not true. This contradicts the very words of Christ.

Once judgment is made, we enter an eternal condition. Every single one of us, and sinners then, have entered eternal darkness. We enter darkness when we sin in this world. We enter a kind of darkness, a partial darkness, moral darkness, spiritual darkness. When we sin in this life, we remove ourselves from God. But at the day of judgment, for those who do not repent, who do not seek Him, this terrifying expression, Jesus says, they will be sent to outer darkness, will be removed entirely and completely from the light of God, so corrupted will those souls be.
But in this life, we have hope, because in this life we have opportunity to repent, to change. Every one of us has the offer constantly to reject darkness, to accept light. And we need to hear this warning, we need to bear with us now, especially as we travel through Lent, this thought of Christ's warning of the Last Judgment. In this life, we have an opportunity to change. In His love, God has shown us what is coming. He wants to catch nobody out. He warns us, He tells us, "Be ready. Do this. Repent, and you will receive joy. You will enter joy."
While we have breath in our lungs, God is offering us mercy. But once we are dead, the opportunity for repentance and intercession from us, and prayer, is gone. Time is running out for many of us. The world is too alluring, the things of this world are too tempting, and people give themselves so completely to the things of the world, and the flesh, and the devil, that they completely turn their back on God.

And there are others whose pride will say, "I don't accept this description of judgment. It doesn't conform to how I think justice should be. It doesn't conform to what I want the end of the world to look like." But of course, what we want and what we consider to be right and just is irrelevant. There is an objective reality, and we will all experience, we will all enter that objective reality of judgment, and we need to prepare ourselves. And Christ wants us to. He calls us to, "Repent, seek my mercy while you have breath, while you have life," for time is running out, and that moment draws and races towards us, every moment drawing closer and closer. As Hieromonk Seraphim Rose says to us, "It's later than you think."

The Most Destructive Sin

Throughout his ministry, Jesus repeatedly warns us about the passion, the sin of pride, and he does this because pride disturbs the mind, the reasoning powers of the mind, more than any other sin, man, more than any other passion. Pride disturbs our capacity to reason. Now, of course, there are many different consequences of self-love, arrogance, presumption, vain glory, and so on, but the most dangerous, the most destructive form of self-love is pride, and this is because pride, pride is contempt for God, contempt for God. When we ascribe to ourselves our achievements, our spiritual growth, our virtues, and so on, are not to God, then it is a denial of God. It places us in opposition to God. We make ourselves enemies of God through pride, and this is such a serious and dangerous condition to find ourselves in that Christ repeatedly gives these teachings to guide us, to protect us, lead us away from falling into pride.

One example of this is the 18th chapter of the Gospel of St Luke, where Jesus teaches the parable sometimes called the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, sometimes the tax collector and the Pharisee. But in this parable, Christ is offering us help when we are tempted to fall into trusting in ourselves. It reminds us that our refusal to recognize God as the true source of every good thing always leads us to judging and condemning other people. Pride, trust in ourselves, always leads to condemnation of other people. When righteousness, which of course the Pharisee describes in his own life, is mixed even with a little pride, then what is good can become demonic.

And when we look at what the Pharisee says at first, his words resemble those of a grateful man. He says to God, "I thank thee, O Lord," but in reality, he is only grateful that he isn't like other men, the sinners that he recognizes and seizes around him. It's clear he believes that he alone is responsible for his good deeds, for his righteousness. Anyone who really understands what he has received from God can't judge someone else for not receiving the same thing from God, because it is a free gift. It is God's grace. It is not earned. We are not worthy. We all are spiritually naked before God, and God wills to dress us in His grace. And when we have been dressed in even a little of God's grace, how can we look and condemn those who still stand naked around us? How can we judge them and condemn them and not pity them, and long for God to have mercy on them?

The Pharisee's pride is what he thinks is in his own strength, but in reality, his pride is what condemns him. He is condemned by his own pride. And Jesus describes this prayer that the Pharisee makes in the parable as a real warning to each of us. He begins by declaring what he

is and what he is not, and boasts as he condemns those around him. Meanwhile, the tax collector stands unable to even lift his eyes to heaven, recognizing he is unworthy even to look to heaven. Such is his condition of humility.

Every one of us has somebody we judge. Let us think of this Pharisee for a moment. He has tithed, he has prayed, he has fasted, and there is a Pharisee, a publican, or a tax collector living sinfully. How easily it would be to fall into condemnation, to judge the life of this person, the outward life. But of course, it is the inner life of the Pharisee that condemns him —his pride, his secret pride. And as we say, every one of us has somebody that we can look to and condemn, to judge. For some of us, it may be something very personal, perhaps a bully from our past, or somebody who has abused us in some particular personal way. For some of us, it may be a whole group of people, perhaps a group of people who we see celebrating their sin, or even a politician who holds very different views and beliefs and ideas to ourselves. But we must be clear that the very difficult, often painful calling of our Christian faith is that we must love our enemies. We must pray for their salvation, and this is not easy. This is a painful thing at times.

For some Americans, maybe the thought of praying for the salvation of Nancy Pelosi, and in Britain there are currently lots of people very angry with Sakir Starmer—and we can select names at random, of course—but these are very contentious people. I've just chosen examples. Maybe for some it will be members of the mass group, for others it will be members of the IDF. Whichever side of the political debate we are drawn to, we must desire the salvation of those who oppose us. And even as I say these things, there will be those who reject this Christian calling to love our enemies, saying, "Oh, how could a country run like this? How could a nation or a political government rule with these kinds of teachings?" This calling is to our hearts. We will not be judged by God about our political affiliations. We will be judged about how we have loved, how we have forgiven, and how we have been obedient to Christ. God will judge our hearts, not the way the country was run that we happened to be born in.

Pride will stand in the way. We may be so sure that we're right about something, that we're not like those who disagree with us, that we end up thinking that their sins are so much greater than ours, because somebody holds a different political, philosophical, whatever it is, position, point of view, ideology. We end up condemning them for their sins. But this judgment is exactly what we hear in the prayer of the Pharisee, and Jesus is warning us that this man left the temple without salvation. This condemnation of others prevented the Pharisee from finding salvation. Let us hear that stark warning from Christ. The devil will provide endless reasons why we shouldn't love, especially those particular people that we feel a satisfaction condemning. But our calling is to perfection. We are sinners. We will be sinners for the whole of our lives, but we are called to perfection, to try, to struggle. We are called to repent, and that means struggling to turn away from our pride, from our self-reliance, and trust in ourselves, from attributing anything to ourselves and not God.

Repentance means turning away from conceit, from self-righteousness, and from placing ourselves above anybody else. Christ became a servant. He showed us. He died on a cross in the most terrible way. We are called to imitate our Lord and to place ourselves below everybody, to be the servant of all. And seeing how far we are away from this, of course, we

must reject the demons when they whisper to us, giving us reasons why we can exclude particular individuals or groups. When we see ourselves failing, failing to love, failing to forgive, then we must ignore these whispers from the demons that tell us, "It's okay, you are right to condemn this person or that group. Look at how they behave. Look at what they've done. Let judgment fill your heart. Condemn them. You are not like this person. You are not so sinful as this person."
We will find healing in humility. It's humility which will enable us to really identify and root out this condemnation, this judgment, in our hearts. Condemnation really affects not just the heart, but it infects the soul like a disease, a spiritual disease. And like the tax collector or publican, we may see that we have nothing good to offer, nothing good of our own to offer God. We have achieved nothing in our own strength. We remain spiritually naked without God dressing us in His grace, as naked as anybody that we would choose to condemn and judge.
Our own achievements, our own virtues, anything good that we recognize in our lives, is not the fruit of our goodness. It is the gift of the grace of God. And in recognizing this, then we may also see that we are entirely dependent on the grace and the mercy of God.

Remember Your Death

One of the essential and fundamental realizations we must come to in our spiritual lives is the brevity of our time on Earth, the shortness of our lives. Once we've truly grasped how close our death is, then our attitude to everything will change: our attitude to our sin, to God, to other people, our attitude to our way of life and the way that we treat worldly things. The realization that our life is very brief will force us into questioning how much we cling to the things of this world or the things of the world to come. We must focus and remind ourselves daily of the brevity of our time here on Earth.
In the 12th chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus teaches a parable to emphasize this teaching: the parable of the rich man who gathers great harvests from his fields and decides to build more and bigger barns to store his great harvest. The church fathers teach us that within this parable there is a juxtaposition between the actions and the activity of God and the activity of the rich man. God, who showed such great mercy by making the fields bring forth this harvest, and the rich man, who brings no spiritual fruits forward. There is nothing spiritual that grows within him, no spiritual fruit. He is driven by greed, and he shows no mercy to the poor. He sees his harvests and his wealth as a means of serving his own ends.
In the parable, the rich man asks, "What must I do? I know, I'll build more barns. I'll knock down my barns and build larger barns. What will I do?" But the poor, of course, ask the very same question: "What will I do? What will I do to deal with my hunger, to deal with my poverty?" And of course, as the church fathers teach us, the rich man has no need to build bigger barns. He already has the empty stomachs of the poor in which to place his great harvest. He has what the fathers called the heavenly storehouses of their hunger, of their empty bellies.
How often do people spend so much time examining where to invest money, what kind of bank accounts will draw the greatest interest, ignoring the empty hands of the poor, which

bring eternal interest, eternal rewards for that investment, for that mercy? And the man says, "My fields, my fields have given forth a great harvest, my barns." And this is the root of his error, the root of the error that we can all fall into: when we forget that everything, all things, belong to God, when we imagine that wealth and resources are ours to do with as we wish, to serve ourselves.
We read there in the parable that the rich man plans to store up his wealth, to store up the harvest for a long life. He plans, of course, for time he doesn't have. He imagines a long life and plans for it in this way, and ignores eternity, which is a certainty. Every one of us may fantasize about the years to come, make great plans for our futures. What plans are we making for the certainty of eternity that faces every one of us? Long life, the church fathers say, is not a crop that we can grow or work for.
And again, when the rich man speaks of eating and drinking and being merry, the fathers say these are the words of an irrational soul. He wants to reward himself with irrational things, reward himself with what is irrational: the food and drink and the mirth of this world. We make ourselves irrational when we chase after worldly pleasure and we ignore the judgment that is speeding towards every one of us, the judgment that Christ came to warn us about, to teach us to prepare ourselves for. Including in this parable, it is the mercy of God that we see through this teaching. God says to us, "Do not be found wanting. Prepare yourselves. Do not be like this rich man."
Let us hear these words of mercy and love of God. We make ourselves irrational fools when we chase after what is foolish, which are the temporal pleasures of this life. In the parable, Jesus says the rich man hears that very night his soul was demanded of him. His soul was demanded of him. His soul is not requested or welcomed or invited. His soul is demanded of him by God. He stands before God empty-handed. His soul will be demanded because he can give nothing to God from the way he lived.

Like the poor that stood before him in his lifetime, empty-handed on Earth, he will have nothing to offer to God. No good works, he has shown no mercy, he's cultivated no virtues, and so his very soul is demanded, demanded of him, and so he is condemned for eternity. We must not squander what God has given us, whether it be wealth, whether it be skills, or simply the time and the opportunities, the encounters that we have in our lives. We mustn't squander anything, anything.
We see his soul is demanded that night, Jesus says, and the Father says. Jesus talks about that night because his soul is darkened, darkened by greed, by his longing for worldly riches, worldly comfort. He has entered a spiritual night. Every one of us enters this spiritual night when we are consumed with a longing for worldly things. When we forget eternity, when we forget God, we enter darkness, spiritual darkness, and we must strive to be filled with divine light. We must recognize that the pursuit of the things of this world will fill us with this spiritual darkness, and we must learn to recognize it, recognize that darkness in ourselves. We must be rich before God. We must do this, of course, by emptying ourselves of a desire for any earthly reward, or even a long life in which to enjoy these rewards.
And of course, when we come before God, we will have nothing to offer in reality. But the scripture tells us that Christ came to save sinners. This does not mean that God wants us to remain in our filth, remain in the worldliness within it, remain in the selfishness and greed of

our sinfulness. Christ came to save sinners and gives us the means by which we may become saints. He gives his teaching, he gives his example, he dies on the cross, and he gives us the Holy Spirit. He gives his body and blood in Holy Communion. He strengthens us through the mysteries of the Church. He gives us everything that is necessary to move from being sinners to become saints, and this is our salvation in him. He gives us everything through his grace, everything that is necessary to be saved.
We must struggle to be generous with every blessing that God gives us. When God grants us his grace, let this grace bubble up and pour out into the world: generosity, mercy, kindness, that when our short life meets its end, we may be judged worthy, worthy stewards of what is temporal, that God will look and see how we have been stewards of what is temporal and ultimately worthless, that we may enter his glory, his glory which is eternal.

Why Demons Exist ?

When Jesus meets the possessed man in the area of the Gadarenes, we see some of the symptoms of demonic activity, symptoms in the possessed man, but symptoms also that we must guard against in our own lives. The possessed man expresses two passions which are warring within him. He is simultaneously both shameless and full of fear. He says to Jesus, “What have I to do with you?” and then, “I beseech thee,” when the demons fear being sent to the place of torment and punishment. How full of these passions is contemporary life: the shameless celebration of sin, as though God can have no part or say or authority in our lives, but simultaneously the relentless fear stoked up in the media about so many things—viruses, environmental catastrophe, nations far away, and so on. How often we see these warring passions in the people around us, but of course in ourselves at times as well.
These passions, of course, don't mean that everyone is possessed, but they are a sign of how the demons are at work in our world. And realizing this, it is natural perhaps to ask ourselves, why would God permit the demons to be here? Why would God permit the activity of the demons in our lives? Why would God even allow the demons to exist at all? Tradition, the Church Fathers teach us, tells us that the demons are permitted by God to wage war on us so that we may battle, that we may be tested in our fight with them, that we may be proved worthy of God's grace, that we may show ourselves worthy of the love and grace that God offers us. Without adversaries, man would have no real strength, no spiritual struggle, and without this contest there could be no crown of victory.
The possessed man, described in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, is naked. We’re told that he doesn't live in a house. These features are symbolic of those who give themselves to evil. They have stripped themselves of their baptismal garment, and they no longer, of course, dwell within the Church. And of course, there are those today who haven't even been baptized into the Church, which is the true home of all humanity everywhere in the world, our home, the Church. The possessed man is described as living among the tombs. Those who dwell outside the Church do indeed live among the dead. They live the lives of the dead because they don't have the life of Christ within them. Once freed from possession, the man pleads with Jesus to allow him to stay with him, but he is sent away. It’s a sign that

those who receive God's healing, God's healing grace, then have Christ with them wherever they go.
So let's learn from this story. Look for the signs of these passions within us. Let us never imagine we can live without God's authority over everything that we do, everything that we seek, everything that we say, in every way that we live. Let us recognize and live according to God's authority, and let us reject the groundless fears that the demons and their servants continuously try to sow within us. Let us be assured: Christ is with us always, everywhere that we go.

Do Not Trust Your Feelings

We, as Western people, are taught to exaggerate, overly focus on our emotions. Films, literature, the culture around us emphasizes the feelings of the protagonists in the stories we read and experience, and so easily we learn to exaggerate the importance of our emotions. We just see them as so much more important than they are, and one of the great deceptions this leads to is interpreting the world, other people, or even God, and our faith in God, and the laws of God, and the revelation of God through the prism of how it makes us feel. This is a great danger, because our feelings then become the standard by which everything can be judged. When we make our emotions the arbiter of truth—how does this make me feel? How do I feel about this aspect of Christian tradition, of God's revelation, and so on?—and when it comes to our struggle to pray and to be obedient, our emotions, we may say, are almost irrelevant.
This is a difficult thing for many Western people to hear: that my feelings, my emotions, could be irrelevant. But the spiritual life requires determination. It requires struggle, a striving to overcome everything that prevents God's presence within us. And often, of course, this will involve self-sacrifice and crucifixion. The emotions may react against these things, may prompt us to avoid that which makes us uncomfortable, which makes life difficult for ourselves. So we must be guarded against the exaggeration of the importance of our feelings, because to know God we have to look beyond ourselves. In order to focus on God's presence, we have to even ignore the distraction of our feelings, or the response that happens to be in us in a particular moment.
So often, even in prayer, we may turn our attention to the warm feelings that the prayer may generate in us, or even a sense of delight in some kind of mystical experience that we perceive we're having. But we must look at how we pray: how am I praying, and ask ourselves, how well have I truly prayed? The answer to this is not to be found in how good it makes us feel. This is a tremendous deception that we can fall into. How has my prayer left me feeling? How deeply have my emotions been stirred? No. The answer is in: has it borne fruit in my life? Has my prayer borne fruit in my life? Has it led to a greater obedience to God? Am I more forgiving of my neighbors, my friends, and family? Has God's will been manifest in me? Have I denied myself? Have I taken up my cross? This is how we must judge our prayer.
The joys of prayer, of course, are a gift of God's grace, and our call is to be determined in our concentration and our focus on God, not on these gifts of God that we may enjoy. When St.

Seraphim of Sarov was asked what makes some people saints while other people remain great sinners, even though both express the Christian faith, his answer was very simple. He said, determination. This is what distinguishes St. Seraphim of Sarov says between great sinners and saints: determination. Everything we must do must be determined as an act of will, a determined act of will. This is true freedom in God. True freedom is found in this determined act of will in our lives. Seeking obedience to God will often completely contradict what our feelings want, because the feelings and desires of the old man within us, the old man as sin, are really the chains of slavery. The feelings of the old man within us are the bondage of our life in slavery, and true spiritual life is only lived when the conscious will is in harmony with God's will. This is the true transformation that the Holy Spirit brings to us: the harmonization of our will with God's will.

There are Christians who think worship consists of waving their hands in the air, grinning wildly, driving home saying how much they enjoyed themselves. Orthodox services can be long, they can be demanding. We stand, we are crucified in our tiredness, we try to crucify our wandering mind. The old man of sin will complain: it's too hard, there's no more enjoyment in this, there's more fun to be found elsewhere. But we must ignore this old man's voice—the old man of death and sin within us. Through this determined act to focus our whole self on God, the old man is silenced along with the desire for fun, for pleasure. Our willingness to turn away from the world, the flesh, and the devil enables us to receive God's grace, and true change then becomes possible in us: the change to truly become as God wants us, in the likeness of Christ, as our hearts long.

So we must refuse the clamor, the noise of our emotions. Let our hearts seek God, and not ourselves, and may He grant us to know the truth of His presence beyond the fantasies of our feelings.

Foresake the World

Jesus proclaimed St. John the Baptist as superior to all the prophets, all the saints, all the righteous men that have ever lived. St. Gregory Palamas emphasizes this, calling St. John the highest summit of holy and righteous man, one recognized and honored by God in a unique way. Of course, we must praise him, as God Himself does, but we must also look at St. John's life and ask ourselves how we can learn from it, what led him to such holiness.

The prophecies describing St. John call him a lampstand—a lampstand on which the light of God would shine, to be proclaimed into the world. We can apply this to ourselves: often we try to force our own ideas, opinions, and thoughts on others, but instead, we are to be a lampstand in the sense that it is Christ that people encounter in us. It is Christ that we proclaim to the world—not our opinions, not our ego, but Christ Himself. Through our love, mercy, and forgiveness, people should see Christ, not ourselves.

St. John became God's voice, proclaiming the truth and pointing to the arrival of the Messiah. He could only speak these words because of the purification and sanctification in his life. In the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, an angel proclaims to Zacharias that he and his wife Elizabeth would miraculously have a child in their old age, and that he "will be great in the sight of the Lord." This is astonishing: a sinful man is identified as being great in God's

eyes. St. John was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, which is why, when Elizabeth encounters Mary, St. John leapt for joy in recognition of the proximity of his Lord through the Holy Spirit. This also reminds us of the value and worth of the unborn child.

St. Gregory Palamas describes St. John as a living instrument of God's grace, and says the world was unworthy of him. For this reason, St. John withdrew to the desert, separating himself from base and worldly influences and protecting himself from pleasures that could easily beguile the senses. He was able to overcome the temptations of the world by living for God alone. The more we live for God, the more we are protected from deception and worldly distractions.

Yet, in God's providence, St. John left the desert to minister to Israel and to proclaim the Messiah. When he confronted Herod, who had publicly committed adultery with his brother's wife, St. John reprimanded him. It is important to note that St. John only called out sin when it was shameless, public, and unrepented. He did not judge private sins; his model is not for shaming others privately.

Finally, St. John's death teaches us much. Herod's fear of the crowd initially prevented him from arresting St. John. Later, out of fear for how his friends would perceive him and a desire to save face, Herod ordered St. John beheaded. Pride and the constant need for approval led Herod to commit terrible evil. This story warns us how man-pleasing and pride can corrupt the heart and lead to sin.

The Church Fathers teach us that the mind is given by God as the king to rule over the senses and the passions. Yet, like Herod, the mind can be charmed or deceived by evil. Herod, a lawless and wicked man, seemed victorious over God's righteous saint, St. John, but in reality, his evil led only to eternal damnation. Similarly, we must not be fooled by the outward appearances of worldly events; short-lived victories of evil over good do not last. God will always have the final word. His will will be done, and we need have no fear.

This principle applies not only to individuals but to politics, conflicts, and wars. Those who seem powerful or victorious will ultimately answer to God's judgment. The holiness of St. John the Baptist is a fruit of a life lived entirely for God, and this is the example we must internalize: to live a life devoted to God.

While the responsibilities and circumstances of our lives may prevent us from literally fleeing to the desert, we are called to enter an "internal desert," the desert of the heart. We must create a secret, quiet place within ourselves, a refuge where we can be alone with God, even amidst the busyness and distractions of daily life.

St. John was not only the Forerunner of Christ but also a herald of monasticism—the life of men and women who physically retreated to the desert to focus solely on God. Even today, such lives inspire and teach us through their example and presence of God.

In his death, St. John foreshadowed the death of Christ. Likewise, we must see our own crucifixion and detachment from the world as a proclamation of Christ's victory. Our own death and self-denial must proclaim both our faith in Christ's victory and His triumph over the powers of this world. Through this inner crucifixion, our lives become a witness to God's eternal power and grace.

Do Not Fear the World

The Church Fathers categorize temptations in many ways, but they emphasize two principal types: outward and inward. Outward temptations are those things that befall us which have nothing to do with our sin or guilt, such as sickness, hunger, or natural disasters. These are not the result of our sin directly, and despite cultural or commercial claims that they are "acts of God," Scripture tells us otherwise. In the first chapter of St. James' letter, we are explicitly reminded that God does not send temptation and is not the author of our struggles. The word temptation itself, as understood by the Church, has a broader meaning than the way the world commonly uses it. While most people think of temptation as a desire to commit sin, the Church recognizes that it can also refer to trials and struggles in life, even those for which we are blameless.

The second type, inward temptations, arises when we give ourselves over to our passions: anger, lust, greed, pride, jealousy, and so on. These temptations are within our power to resist through repentance, but if we yield to them, they inflict guilt and spiritual sickness. St. Gregory Palamas teaches that these are the temptations over which we should mourn—those sins for which we bear responsibility. While we are accountable for all our sins, he warns us not to grieve over the outward struggles of life, which ultimately bring no spiritual or eternal harm. Outward trials, he and other Church Fathers remind us, are opportunities to grow spiritually and to draw closer to God. We are called to pass through these trials as Christ did, enduring hunger, suffering, and even death.

Many of us grieve over the wrong kinds of temptations, panicking over worldly events, rumors, or disasters that befall our nations, because we focus on material comfort, safety, and relief rather than on God's grace. It is the inner temptations that truly threaten the soul, and we require God's grace to overcome them. If we indulge in these inner passions, outward chaos, misery, and additional suffering often follow, such as sickness resulting from harmful habits like smoking or drinking.

In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the disciples are caught in a storm while in a boat. In their panic, they cry out to Jesus, who approaches, walks on the water, and calms the storm. This story has many layers of interpretation, but at its most basic, it demonstrates that Jesus has power over everything that threatens us. He commands authority over nature itself and has the power to save us from all dangers, even those that we fear most. This event occurs immediately after Jesus fed the five thousand men, women, and children, showing that just as He provides sustenance and care, He also sends us deliberately into the challenges of the world to face storms and trials, trusting in His presence. In the story, the disciples safely cross to the other side, illustrating how God's guidance and power bring us through both outward trials and the inner struggles of the soul.

The disciples were victorious over their trials, overcoming their fear of the great storm by putting their trust in Christ. We are called to do the same in our own lives, to go beyond the outward temptations and struggles that confront us, and to pass through the challenges of life just as the disciples crossed the lake and reached the other shore safely. The storm in this event symbolizes the persecutions and hostilities stirred by Satan against the Church, the

adversities faced by God's people in the world. Like the disciples, we must call out to Christ and put our trust in Him, for He alone has the power to enable us to triumph.
The world has become increasingly unsettled and fearful, as evil walks openly, blasphemy and idolatry are shamelessly accepted, and children are led astray by the surrounding culture. These realities are often celebrated, and what we see is not merely indifference to God, but open hostility and hatred toward Him, as exemplified even in public events such as the Olympic opening ceremonies. Yet in the face of all this, Jesus speaks to us as He spoke to the disciples in the storm, saying, "O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" The storms will be calmed, and all evil will ultimately be wiped away. We must hold fast to confidence and faith, knowing that doubt weakens the soul, but trust in Christ brings victory.
Through their experience in the storm, the disciples were enabled to proclaim Jesus as God. Likewise, Jesus permits the storms and temptations in our lives, allowing us to struggle so that we may be perfected, just as the apostles were. Even in this life, through faith, like Peter, we too may walk on the waters with Christ, overcoming all that threatens us and realizing the power of God's presence in our lives.

Prepare To Leave This World

The early morning when the Theotokos, Mary Magdalene, and the other myrrh-bearing women went to the tomb to prepare the body of Our Lord. They went in faith, out of love for Christ, to care for His body. Upon arriving, they encountered an angel, who acknowledged their devotion and proclaimed, "He is not here; He is risen." This moment reminds us that we too must seek our crucified Lord, for only by seeking Him in His crucifixion do we encounter Him in His resurrection.
As disciples of Christ, we are also called to be crucified if we truly follow Him. Christ died once and rose from the dead to enter eternal joy on our behalf, and while on Earth we may taste the joy of Pascha, it is fleeting. After experiencing it, we return to our struggles and pains, yet we are called to find courage in Christ's victory. Every step we take toward Calvary, every act of repentance, every moment of struggle brings us closer to the eternal joy of Pascha. Our sorrows and trials can lead us to God's joy only if we place our hope in Christ's love and endure for His sake; otherwise, our suffering remains empty and meaningless.
The Church Fathers describe this joy as the reward that the saints will receive when they approach the Throne of God—a reward that is eternal, never diminished or taken away. They will behold the Divine face of Christ, which illuminates their souls. As we walk the path of sorrows toward Pascha, it is Christ's face that we approach with every act of repentance, forgiveness, and obedience, and every effort to resist judging our neighbor. We are called in this life to struggle against all that darkens our vision and soul, for sin prevents us from seeing Christ. Every time we turn to sin, we turn away from Him, and yet the path to His presence lies in refusing to fill our hearts with the temporary things of this world.
Our experience of life here must be one of continual detachment, a process of leaving the world, preparing for death, and orienting ourselves toward the life to come. In recognizing the brevity and temporality of our trials, temptations, and personal crosses, we find liberation

from the power of the world and even from death itself. By closing our hearts to the fleeting and opening them to the eternal—to God, His kingdom, His mercy, love, and forgiveness—we begin to perceive Christ. This perception is strengthened through the cross, which requires us to resist temptation and remain steadfast in our pursuit of the eternal.

We must humble ourselves and recognize that the remainder of this life is a gift from God—a time for repentance, a time in which we may taste a small portion of the life to come. God offers us in this world glimpses of the eternal life that awaits after death. All regrets left unaddressed will be of no use once we have passed from this life; they will not help us at all. Yet in His mercy, God calls us to readiness, to change, and we must listen attentively to our conscience in this life. To ignore it is to waste the opportunity God places before us, for those regrets will serve no purpose after death.
God continuously provides everything necessary for our salvation, to save us from the world and from Hell. As the season of Lent concludes and our hearts turn toward the joy of Pascha, we are called to embrace this earthly celebration as both a reminder and a foretaste of the eternal joy that God is constantly offering. This joy is not fleeting, but a call to participate in the life God invites us to now, in preparation for the eternal fulfillment that awaits.

Do Not Dispair

Heresy, the holding of wrong beliefs or wrong thoughts about God, places our soul in danger. It is not some abstract or purely theoretical issue, but a matter of faith and of salvation. Wrong thinking about God can affect the very foundations of our faith and the very condition of our soul. One clear example of this is the way we understand sin, justification, and salvation. We must reject legalism in all its forms. Sin is not simply a rule broken; it is a spiritual sickness, a wound inflicted upon the soul. Every time we sin, we harm not only ourselves but also the entire body of Christ. Elder Ephraim of Mount Athos and Arizona reminds us that every sin is like driving a fresh nail into the body of Christ.
If we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are not truly great sinners, that our sin is limited or insignificant, we are far from God. The deeper we enter into the mystery of Christ, the more the Holy Spirit convicts us of the reality and depth of our sin. Many saints wept continuous tears over their sins, yet seeing the truth of their sin did not lead them to despair. Rather, they recognized the spiritual medicine that God continuously offers: repentance. Repentance is the healing of the soul, a spiritual medicine that restores what sin has wounded. We may declare our love for Christ before the world, but without repentance, salvation is impossible. Modern claims of being already “saved” are a demonic deception, for they remove the urgency to repent and turn from sin. All of us will continue to sin to our last breath, and without repentance, the devil gains control of our souls. Christians must instead hold hope in God’s mercy, forgiveness, and love. Repentance, the church fathers teach, is like a second baptism. When we cry out to God with genuine intention to turn from sin, He accepts us, forgives us, and restores us, no matter how many times we have fallen. Repentance is not mere regret, sorrow, or shame. Through Christ, repentance has become a reality that grants the remission of sins. In it, we open ourselves to God’s mercy. Scripture

recounts holy people weeping over their sins: St. Peter after denying Christ, King David in the Psalms. Tears of mourning for worldly loss cannot restore what is lost in this life, but tears of repentance restore what is eternal—the closeness to God, the peace of heart, the purity of soul. The fire of sin is extinguished by the tears of repentance.
We should rejoice and be grateful for the gift of repentance, which can erase all sin. Christ has overcome sin and death, and He invites us to share in this joy through repentance. God's love is greater than any sin we could commit, and His love transforms us from sin to purity. St. John Chryssostom gives a vivid image: a single hot coal can burn and destroy, yet if thrown into the sea, it is immediately extinguished. Likewise, our sins, cast into the sea of God's mercy through repentance, are extinguished, and we are purified. God's mercy is unlimited.

But the demons will tempt us with thoughts of death and despair. They will whisper that we have sinned too often, too deeply, or in ways too grave to be forgiven. We hear it in ourselves and in others: "Yes, God forgives, but look at how I have fallen. Look at the terrible sins I have committed. God surely cannot forgive this." This, however, is a demonic temptation, a trick designed to drive us into despair. God's mercy is unlimited. When we repent, confess, and turn from our sins, God forgives us completely. Those sins are removed forever; they are never seen again.
We must guard ourselves not only from despair but also from becoming blind to sin. Elder Ephraim of Mount Athos offers a reflection on St. John Chrysostom: God does not simply extinguish the charcoal of our sins; He transforms it, turning it into a diamond. Likewise, God takes what destroys us and fashions it into something precious and beautiful. It is by this divine power that sinners are made saints, that diamonds are formed from charcoal. The demons tirelessly oppose this transformation, seeking to prevent repentance and discourage us from returning to God.
No matter how many times we fall into sin, even into the same sins repeatedly, we must repent, again and again. The grace received through confession assures us that, in time, we will be freed from the dominion of our passions. Every one of us is a sinner, yet despair is a temptation from the demons, a trick to keep us from seeking God's mercy. Paradise will not be filled with sinless people; it will be filled with those who have repented. Let us, therefore, rush to confession and embrace the transforming power of God's mercy.

Counterfeit Spirituality

True Christian worship and prayer is not only different from, but often very alien to, what is presented as Christian worship and prayer in the West. Authentic Christian spirituality has often been replaced with a counterfeit, a counterfeit we must guard ourselves against developing within us, and we can only do so if we recognize it and understand the difference between this counterfeit and authentic spirituality. This counterfeit is worldly and man-centered, which is why it fails to satisfy the heart and leaves so many Western Christians longing for something more than their form of religion offers. It may produce emotional experiences, group dynamics that excite people, or temporary feelings of being moved, but

the effects are fleeting. This counterfeit spirituality does not lead to transformation through repentance and, ultimately, may have nothing to do with salvation.
The real danger is that it keeps people in an infantile spiritual state, preventing them from truly encountering God. The heart must no longer be focused on itself; it must turn to God. This requires that we not be consumed even by longings for the gifts of God or the comfort He provides. True, authentic spirituality is the desire for God Himself, not for what He gives us, but for God alone. It takes strength and courage to face the pain of reality: to admit that our lives are full of suffering and do not meet our expectations. In this desolation, we must turn to God, not to escape or overcome the pain, but to desire Him above all, even more than relief from suffering.
As Metropolitan Anthony said, to be Christian is to love with the joy and anguish we see in Christ. In an infantile spiritual state, we experience every pain as something we must escape from, hoping God will remove it. True Christian discipleship, however, is to enter Calvary as Christ said: "Not my will, but Your will be done." We follow Christ in abandonment, in being wounded, rejected, mocked, with the promise of Resurrection. We do not set the timetable for this victory in our lives. Authentic Christian spirituality teaches that the joy God brings is known not only in Resurrection to come but in the willingness to take up our cross and face suffering. We find Christ's victory in our cross, not just in the Resurrection.
This is impossible if we live only for the world, constantly fearing or fleeing death. The world and the devil cannot rob us of death if we live for Christ. Knowing this, we can rejoice that the struggles of this world cannot overcome us. Christian faith must not be reduced to self-help, a means to make life more bearable, or a path to personal fulfillment. When we truly know we will die, only Christ matters; He must be everything to us. Even in prayer, we approach God, knowing the judgment we will face. St. Anthony the Great, father of monasticism, said: always have your sins before you and look through them to God. The pain of this encounter comes from our sinfulness and our desertion of Him. We are not only those who called for Christ's crucifixion; we are those who crucified Him. He allowed this only out of love for us, and love is the reason we take up our cross and follow Him to Calvary.
Our focus must move from ourselves to God. Authentic Christian spirituality calls us to reject all counterfeit forms, to turn away from suffering, from our desires, and even from seemingly good longings if they center on ourselves. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, and we must move beyond an infantile spiritual condition, turning away from everything, especially ourselves, and returning wholly to the One who loves us.

Refuse the Devils Madness

In order to be changed by God, we must become more like the Saints and imitate the holiness of those Servants of God who have gone before us. We must understand what true holiness looks like. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus describes holiness by saying, "Blessed are the meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those persecuted for Christ's sake." If we desire to imitate the holiness of the Saints, we must ask ourselves how to cultivate these virtues in our souls and in our lives. St. Gregory Palamas teaches that love of God is the starting point and

the source of every virtue, while love of the world is the source of every evil. As St. James, the brother of Our Lord, writes, if we are friends of the world, we make ourselves enemies of God. Love of God and love of the world are opposing forces; they cannot coexist in the heart. Just as the seed sown in a field determines what will grow, so too does what we nurture in our hearts shape our spiritual life. If we sow base longings for the things of this world, passions and vices will grow within us. If, however, we read spiritually nourishing books, attend holy services, pray, meditate on the lives of the Saints, and study Scripture, virtues can grow. The devil, as the Book of Job warns, lies in wait beneath the trees of worldly pleasure, enticing the unwary. Love of the world springs from materialism and bodily desire, while love of God arises from recognizing all that He has done for us, from gratitude for His goodness, and from the ability to perceive the beauty of His creation. Even the natural world, though fallen, retains the beauty God put into it, and we are called to recognize and enjoy it as a gift from Him.

It is vital for our spiritual health to observe every thought and feeling, to spot anything that diminishes our love of God. False anger toward God, a sense of injustice, or judging Him by worldly standards are all demonic influences and must be rejected. True virtues cultivate a joy that cannot be stolen. The fleeting pleasures of the world, the body, and wealth pass away, just as our physical lives pass away. Every one of us must awaken from the madness of exchanging the eternal joys of God's Kingdom for temporary worldly pleasures. We must reject the enticements of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which enslave us and rob us of the dignity of being created in God's image.

Each of us is called to things above the world. It is a mystery and miracle that flesh and blood are called by God to the eternal. Satan rules through the philosophies and schemes of this world, and we must reject them all. Anger, pride, vanity, riches, and status give the devil power in our lives; they are snares that enslave us. True virtues, born from love of God, are the fruits of freedom in God and a sign of the dignity God restores to humanity through Christ. Love of God is a foretaste of the eternal joy of His Kingdom, and by cultivating it, we begin to experience the life to which we are called.

Why Must We Suffer ?

In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, we read of Jesus performing the miracle of feeding five thousand men, along with women and children. While it is unlikely that they would have starved to death—they may have gone hungry that night—their lives were not in danger. Yet, in His care for the people, Jesus performs this great miracle, taking a few loaves and fishes and multiplying them to feed everyone. The abundance, with twelve baskets of leftovers, signifies God's care, blessing, and love for humanity, extending beyond mere need or expectation. Throughout history, both before and after Christ's incarnation, there have been miracles in which God intervenes to heal, protect, and guide His people. These events are signs of God's involvement in our lives.

However, there are times when we or those we love are in danger, and despite our prayers, no apparent miracle occurs. We may be tempted to believe God has abandoned us, but such thinking is a judgment of God by human standards. His wisdom is not ours, and it is

extremely difficult to move beyond our limited perception of how God "should" act. We often fail to see how corrupted our judgment has become, even when compared to the Saints of the Church or humanity in previous generations. When struggles, trials, and temptations confront us, we must remember that God judges differently than we do. Our Lord teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Trusting in His providential care means trusting that whatever He allows in our lives is ultimately for our good and guided by His perfect wisdom.

A story from the Desert Fathers illustrates this point. A young monk was sent by his Elder into town to sell their crafts and buy provisions. As he arrived, he saw a grand funeral procession for a notorious harlot in the town. Confused and troubled, he returned to his Elder, only to find the holy man being devoured by a lion. Distraught, the young monk decided to abandon monastic life, feeling that God's care was absent. On his way back to town, an angel appeared and explained what he had seen. The harlot, despite her sinful life, had performed a few good deeds, which God rewarded in this life, ensuring she would face judgment with nothing to claim. The Elder, though truly holy, underwent purification in this life for minor sins, and God had already forgiven him through his suffering. The angel's words revealed to the monk how false his judgment had been, and he returned to the cave, enlightened about God's wisdom and justice.

This story underscores that God's ways are beyond human understanding. Apparent injustices or the timing of His providence are not indications of neglect or absence of care. God's judgment and mercy operate on a level we cannot fully comprehend, and faith requires trust beyond immediate appearances. Protestant critics might immediately respond that Christ has paid the price for all, yet the story emphasizes that God's justice and mercy operate personally and uniquely in the lives of each soul, in ways that often surpass human reasoning.

This passage emphasizes the proper understanding of Christ's sacrifice and our response to God's Providence. Christ's shedding of His blood is the only means of salvation; without Him, we can attain nothing. Yet, Christ calls each of us to carry our cross, to walk the way of Calvary—not for suffering's sake alone, but as a path toward salvation. Every command and instruction from Christ is for our eternal good. Misunderstanding His death or judging God's actions according to human standards risks rejecting the very opportunity for salvation that Christ offers.

We are called to accept the events of this world as God's will, including our personal sufferings and struggles. When we feel anger, frustration, or fear at life's circumstances or the behavior of others, these emotions reveal that our hearts are not fully trusting God. True faith requires recognizing that our lives are entirely in God's hands—every moment, every encounter, every event is permitted by His Providence. Our lack of trust and impatience are areas for repentance, so we may cultivate genuine faith and surrender.

The martyrs of the Church offer a profound example. In arenas where they faced death by beheading or wild animals, their faces radiated joy, astonishing onlookers. This joy was not born of recklessness but of total trust in God. Through their suffering and martyrdom, they earned holy crowns and were received into eternity by God and His angels. Similarly, we can only attain peace in this world when we relinquish our judgments about how life should unfold, how people should behave, and how God "ought" to act.

We may see sinful people prosper, accumulating wealth, power, and praise from the world, while the righteous struggle. Reflecting on the story of the harlot and the holy Elder from the Desert Fathers, we recognize that God's ways are not ours to judge. The harlot, despite her sin, received temporal reward in this world so she would face judgment with nothing to claim, while the holy Elder underwent purification through suffering. Likewise, understanding that our struggles and sufferings are under God's providential care allows us to let go of resentment and judgment. Only then can we begin to taste the profound peace of heart that Christ offers—a peace rooted not in worldly circumstances, but in complete trust in God's love and providence.

Combating Evil Thoughts

There is an old saying that nothing in this life comes for free, and this is particularly true of everything that the demons tempt us with. Every pleasure, every promise made to us by the demons, comes with a hidden price—and not just any price, but the greatest price of all: spiritual death. As Saint Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, "the wages of sin is death."

The demons have been practicing the art of deception for thousands of years. Their skill in deception is extraordinarily developed. They look for our weaknesses and exploit them—not only weaknesses in our behavior and actions but, even more importantly, weaknesses of thought.

We only have a short time on this Earth, and so we must turn to the Church Fathers and the Saints, who have been victorious in this struggle over evil thoughts. What do they teach us? What can they share from their experiences of spiritual victory? We need these lessons more than ever, because mental and spiritual ill health has reached levels never seen before, particularly among young people, who grow up immersed in a digital world, taught by schools and media that evil is good and good is evil. Evil thoughts and prompts are everywhere; we are constantly bombarded by voices, music, television, and media designed to deceive.

So what do the Church Fathers and Saints teach about victory over evil thoughts? Not surprisingly, the first stage is prayer—but not just any prayer. They speak of the humility of prayer. Victory over evil thoughts is founded upon standing before God and acknowledging our own weakness. The Church Fathers teach that demons are powerless against those shielded by the strength of God. And we can only be truly shielded in this way—through God's strength—when we practice humility: when we admit our weakness before Him, acknowledge that we cannot be victorious without His grace, and recognize that we are utterly dependent on His infinite power.

Of course, Christ often commands us to love and to forgive, which is central to our faith. But the Church Fathers also warn us: yes, we must love God and love each other—but we must hate sin and its author, Satan. We must learn to despise Satan, for he is the enemy of Christ and also our enemy. He not only seeks to deceive us, but he would drag us into hell with him on Judgment Day. He hates us, and he works tirelessly against our salvation.

If we allow him to lead us even slightly astray, we risk losing our way. Therefore, hate sin, hate Satan, and despise everything he offers. The world, the flesh, and the devil—all their temptations are snares. The Church Fathers say that the "daughters of Babylon" are the evil thoughts: they must be recognized, crushed in their infancy, and rejected before they take root and grow into passions that dominate our soul.

When we read the Psalms, we see that the "daughters of Babylon" are evil thoughts. We must crush them on the rocks while they are still in their infancy, before they grow strong, before they take root in our hearts and minds, and begin to affect our soul.

To do this, we must become watchful—watchful of every movement in our hearts, every thought, every feeling that we allow to grow within us. Let us guard ourselves, learning to recognize evil thoughts when they first appear, when they are merely tempting and prompting us, still small and manageable.

When we fall and sin, we must look back and recognize the thoughts that led to that fall, trace them to their origin, and see them as infants that must be crushed before they grow so deeply rooted in us that they become passions. We must actively drive these evil thoughts away.

But the Church Fathers teach us that it is not enough to merely drive them away. An empty mind will simply be filled again, and the demons will return, bringing yet more evil thoughts. So, we must replace the evil with virtue: fill the mind with light, with prayer, with verses from Scripture, with the lives of the Saints, with thoughts of death and our own mortality, with gratitude to God for all that He gives us. Fill the mind with these good things so that evil has no place. Let the light illuminate the corners of our hearts and minds, leaving no room for shadows or darkness.

When we are bombarded with evil thoughts, we must remember that we are never alone. The choirs of angels are with us, the Saints and angels pray for us—they are the army that fights alongside us, far greater than the army of our enemy. We must never despair. The demons will try to convince us that we are alone, but when we struggle for Christ, we struggle with the greatest army ever created: God's army of angels and Saints.

We can also cry out to the Holy Theotokos, who nurtures us, surrounds us with her motherly love, and prays for us. Though we refuse evil thoughts, we should not engage with them or allow ourselves to be troubled by them. We must reject them without becoming distressed or disturbed by their presence.

Who among us should be surprised that we sometimes think evil thoughts? Are we not all sinners? It is no shock to discover that we are sinners, and that these thoughts will come. The devil will always find a way to sow evil in our minds.

But we can remain at peace. We must flick these thoughts away like unwanted flies. We must not struggle with them, nor become distressed or despair. Push them aside. Tell Satan to get behind us. Do not engage; do not wrestle with them or allow them to enter us. Refuse them. And to do all of this, of course, we must remain focused on God, staying alert to our thoughts and feelings. We must do this because God sees all, and He will judge even the most secret parts of our soul.